MRS ESSINGTON

ESTHER & LUCIA CHAMBERLAIN

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MRS. ESSINGTON

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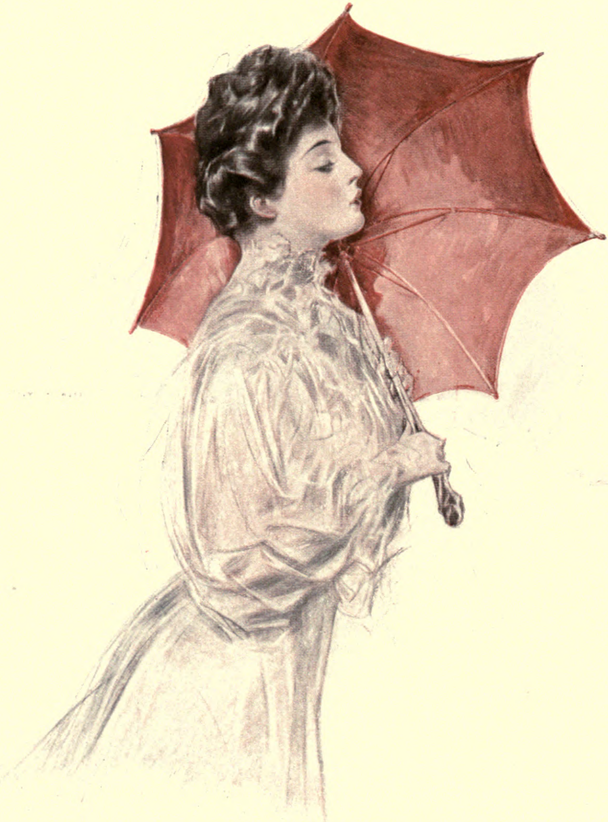

Mrs. Essington

MRS. ESSINGTON
The Romance of a House-party

BY

ESTHER AND LUCIA
CHAMBERLAIN

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY HENRY HUTT

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MRS. ESSINGTON

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CHAPTER I

THE HOUSE-PARTY EXPLAINS ITSELF, AND GETS INTO A FOG

"STILL, I don't reconcile you with that lot," the young man broke out, after a silence that had lasted long enough to be intimate. He leaned toward her across the space between the two chairs, lifting his voice a little to be heard above the racket of the car-wheels.

The woman did not directly reply, unless there was an answer in the small profile smile she gave him. She had sat for the past ten minutes admirably still, her face turned from him, her eyes on the flat blue-green of onion-fields interminably wheeling past the window.

"I mean," he presently went on in his easy fashion, "they 're hardly your sort. Oh, good people, but — dullish, you know; the kind you never put up with unless you have to."

She gave him again the flitting, profile smile, with an added twinkle, from which his face seemed to catch illumination; and, for a moment, they smiled together with the hint of some common reminiscence.

"At all events," he came back again, "I can't see why you, of all people, would be going to the Budds!"

She moved at last, turning a full look upon him. The supple bend of her long throat, and the cool gray light of her eyes in the warm shadow of their lashes, touched him like a harmony in music. The beauty and eloquence of her movements had always appealed to him as her special charm. His eyes followed the flowing lines of her attitude more attentively than his ears followed the first part of her reply.

"No, they're not our sort,"—she spoke with slight emphasis on the pronoun,—" and "—the subtle modelings around her mouth shadowed a smile — " we 'll probably bore them horribly. But I 'm going — for the same reason that you are. You know I have never met Julia Budd."

" But I have," said Fox Longacre, flushing a little, his blue eyes steadily meeting her bright gaze.

" Which comes, does n't it, to the same thing? Are n't we both going to 'Miramar' to see Miss Budd?"

" She 's lovely — to look at," he admitted.

" And not in other ways?"

He seemed to ponder this, his clever young face puckered with an exaggeration of gravity. He gave it up with a puzzled laugh.

"'Pon my word, I don't know! That 's what I 'm going for."

"To find out — ?"

"Oh, whether she is perfectly charming, or — just the other thing."

It struck her that his manner was more offhand than the occasion required — that the alternative he had just so gaily admitted troubled him more than he wished her to know.

But Florence Essington knew, in spite of him, more than she looked, and much more than she said. She felt that she at least foresaw so much that to spare herself the train of thought she answered him in quite another vein.

"You know, Tony," she said, with that little, settling movement women use to begin a gossip, "what really amuses me is that we have n't — at least I have n't — the slightest idea, not a glimmer, what people Mrs. Budd will be asking down. She hardly knows me, has n't seen me since I left school for Paris — don't you dare to mention how long ago! And yet she fairly threatened me into it, eyes popping and every hair a-quiver. I quite got the feeling that she wants something of me."

"Of course," he grinned cheerfully, "they always do."

"But something special."

"Letters of introduction?" he hazarded. "It 's quite on the cards. They 'll be going to London next season, if she does n't—but, of course, you know what she 's after."

"Not, at any rate, *you*," she quizzed.

At this he laughed out, "Oh, Lord, no!"

Their common amusement was made up of their common knowledge of his shabby income, his opera still on probation, and his purely potential career.

The speed of the train was notably slackening. The porter had made the round with his whisk-broom, and was carrying bags and golf-kits to the outer platform. The greater number of travelers had risen, and were rushing or rustling into their coats. Most of these people seemed to know one another, were all bound for a common goal — the little city of country houses. In the next three days they would all meet half a dozen times. They exhaled the heady atmosphere of their small, smart community.

The stucco front of the San Mateo station slid slowly past the window. When the train finally came to a stop the chair-car was at the far end of the long platform, its windows commanding the full curve of the drive where it swept out of the encroaching trees.

The two, who remained seated in the midst of the general departure, now realized that the exodus would leave them solitary.

"Good!" said Longacre, contentedly, settling more comfortably into his chair.

His companion leaned forward to look down the long wooden platform where, already, the newly alighted travelers were segregating themselves and their parties, one from another, and were being driven away in a light whirl of dust. The travel seemed all arrival. One or two callow, negligent college boys swung aboard the smoker. The porter took up the stool.

"I really believe —" Mrs. Essington began. The sight of a victoria lurching around the turn of the drive stopped her sentence.

The vehicle, so indisseverably connected with state and dignity of progression, bounded at the heels of galloping horses, its occupant leaning forward with the air of one who would accelerate top speed. The rigs, driving away from the station, parted for its onward rush. Heads craned toward it. There was a chorus of laughing recognitions. A man swung his hat. The train gave a preliminary pulse and quiver as the victoria came to a violent halt, and the lady sprang out in a puff of light silk, and ran fluttering and flapping along the platform. The conductor and porter, all agrin, with an arm under each of her elbows hoisted her to the step of the now moving train. The footman threw up the last of half a dozen bags.

Mrs. Essington leaned back and laughed silently across to her companion.

"A victoria! Would n't you know she would!" he observed half quizzically, half ruefully.

"She 's so pretty!"

"Oh, pretty," he conceded generously enough, as the lady's full-throated laugh preceded her into the car.

She fairly burst upon them, laughing, blooming, glittering.

"Of all people! You dear things!" She squeezed a hand of each affectionately. "Don't tell me there is nothing in premonition! I had one when I told James the horses must gallop. 'James,' I said, 'it is absolutely *necessary* that I catch that train, if

I get out and run for it.' James adores me, though of course he *knew* we looked ridiculous. But it does n't matter, now that I have *you* — and just as I was expecting to be alone *all* the way to Monterey!"

She sighed, and sank into the seat Longacre had swung round for her; rose again to be helped out of her coat; removed her hat; caressed her coiffure; resettled in her chair and shifted the fluttering folds of her skirts, with a regret or two for her own helplessness and a hope that the forbearance of her friends was not merely forbearance. Her almond eyes, blue shot with green, implored Longacre's to refute the self-accusation. But he chose to do so in a neat sentence.

Watching her, he had a sense that by her vivacity she staved off the reproach of superabundant flesh. It was marvelous, the way the avoirdupois seemed to lessen under her animation. The wide cheeks flaring away from the dwindling chin; the tight, rosy little mouth drawn up at the corners in a faint, perpetual smile; the tortoise-shell combs that pressed her glossy hair close above her pointed ears, all reminded Longacre irresistibly of a tortoise-shell — but he stopped the simile to answer Cissy Fitz Hugh's appeal concerning the fate of his opera.

He answered automatically this question, that had of late begun to weary him, acceding good-naturedly to Mrs. Fitz Hugh's sweeping declaration of her passion for music in general; but he was unhappily aware that Florence Essington had teasingly assumed the remote but interested air of a spectator at what threatened to be a tête-à-tête. Nay, more: her eyes laughed at his attempts to draw her back. He had the aggrieved feeling of a child whose game has been spoiled. Well, if Florence would n't play, neither would he. But he was pleasant about it. He slid easily from good-humored flattery to genial silence, from genial silence to the smoking-car.

Cissy watched his departure with a pettish mouth. But when the sharp snapping of the vestibule door had shut the two women in together she extended her small, plump feet with a luxurious stretch, and turned to Mrs. Essington with a "Well, my dear!" that implied, "At last!" She created the impression that she had lived only for this moment. Florence seemed to see herself exhibited as Cissy's sole confidante.

"You know," Cissy began, "it was so sweet of Emma Budd to ask me for the week's end, though of course I don't hunt — but with poor Freddy on his back since the pony-races, and all the horrid fuss with the plumbing — and the lawsuit, I 've been really too anxious for pleasure." She passed a plump hand over an unlined brow.

"But when Emma rang up yesterday to beg, and happened to let drop *your* name, I said, 'If Mrs. Essington is going I really will make *one* effort.'" She beamed with candor.

Florence's smile surmised that the name for which the effort had been made was more probably Fox Longacre's. But Cissy's complacence was impervious.

"It was a delightful surprise to hear you *were* going! You come to us so little!" she lamented.

"Who could resist the country in September?" Florence felt unable to add amenities to the already overcharged atmosphere.

"Oh, of course! I just *crave* the country!" Cissy agreed.

"Then the hunting—" Florence continued, aware that quite different reasons were expected of her—"Mrs. Budd makes her parties interesting with their variety."

"Oh, yes—variety," Cissy cut in. "Emma just craves it! Did you know she 's asked D. O. Holden—and he 's going?"

At Cissy's round-eyed pause, Florence felt an inclination to laugh. Variety seemed to her the last word reminiscent of Holden. Looking back over the past six months, he appeared to her the one strong, unvarying, dominant, reiterated note in her resumed American experiences.

"Really!" she managed with gravity.

"Really!" Cissy echoed impressively. "But why *such* a man, who does n't care for anything but railroads, should be going to Emma, who does n't care for anything but marrying Julia — Of course" — her shallow eyes endeavored to plumb Mrs. Essington's — "he 's going for something in particular." She topped it off with her laugh, that seemed to fill her thick throat.

"Perhaps," Florence helped her out, "he 's going for the same reason that you are?"

Cissy looked both blank and disconcerted.

"Poor man, he 's usually too anxious for pleasure!" Florence explained.

Cissy took it in seriously. "Really the fact is, a woman is *never* free from her cares!

But a man, when he rests, rests so completely!"

She sighed, with her eyes on the door through which Fox Longacre had departed.

She added inconsequently, "You know Emma has asked my cousin Charlie Thair. Of course it 's perfectly plain why Emma asked *him*. The wonder is that he dares to go!" Florence could only guess at the situation, but she thought the wonder would have been if Thair had dodged it. "Though it 's perfectly indecent of him, I 'm sure, with his money, not to marry," Cissy ran on; "and of course Julia is a magnificent creature. But the idea of expecting to really 'land' Charlie! It 's too funny! So like dear Emma."

Upon this point Florence was, silently, in accord with Mrs. Fitz Hugh. She could see — from Mrs. Budd's point of view that every eligible man not only should, but sooner or later would, marry some suitable girl — how the proposition was a reasonable one. But she felt there was as slight a possibility of Charlie Thair's being unseated from his bachelor state as from his hunting-saddle.

"Was there" — it was the following thought — "such a scant possibility of Fox Longacre?"

She turned from her vis-à-vis to the window, as the train, with a roar and a swing, rushed into the cañon, and fixed her eyes on the dizzy fascination of the whirling river below.

The stream of events of the last five years was more rapid and intricate to the vision of her mind. The first light ripple on this stream was her clear memory of the charming, inconsequent American boy whom she had met in Vienna five years before. It had been on one of her trips, that were always solitary, since Captain Essington was too busy spending her neat little fortune in various very private and proper gambling-clubs to care how his wife amused herself.

How this boy, Fox Longacre, with his facile Gallic Americanism, had stood out among the miscellaneous lot of students of the Vienna Conservatory! She remembered his passionate enthusiasm for the music that he whimsically called his "trade," his spasmodic application.

They had got on famously in their short, merry acquaintance.

She had felt it the greatest pity in the world that he should be an orphan, a waif, with just enough money to let him be comfortably idle, and such potentialities of power running riot.

She had regretted the end of that gay little friendship when she returned to her sad-colored London.

Between this first encounter and the next intervened her catastrophe. Something done in those private and particular gambling-houses — something that never clearly came out of them — swallowed the half of the money remaining, and directed the shot that ended Captain Essington's life. A grim, a bitter wrench it had been! The mere memory of it brought back the ghost of the old ache. She had realized then what depths of suffering might be, in which love and bereavement bore no part. Even the relief of freedom had been overwhelmed in the shock of violent death, of disorganized existence.

How vividly it had set before her the instability of present circumstances, the danger of depending on what had been! She had been frightened to drawing into herself, away from the interests of the world around her that had meant so much to her.

In her vague retrospection it seemed to her it had been more the kindness of her friends than any effort on her own part that had not only kept, but lifted her place among them in the difficult years that followed; such a place that, when the brilliant boy of her Vienna memory turned up in London, older, less confident, more moody by three years, and desperately "out" of everything he should have been "in," she had almost bewildered him by the number of doors she could open to him. All her social threads so casually picked up, at once had significance, were manipulated to a purpose. What a zest, what a spirit her life had had! How self-distrustful he had been! How she had, at moments, pulled him after her! It had been desperate at times to keep him up to it, but every minute had been worth living. And now that her long hope was almost realized, now that he seemed on the very verge of his success,— now —

She shifted her eyes to the two bright glints on the toes of Cissy Fitz Hugh's patent leathers. The car was one dusky tone in the deepening twilight, and these two hypnotic points of light helped to fix her memory more clearly on the past.

Well, she had been the one woman to him.

He had glorified her as a boy will. What a joy it had been, that adoring loyalty of his, even while she knew she cheated him! The memory of his old impetuosity, his insistence, his unhesitating confidence over the inevitable question that had risen between them, came back to her, a warm, pleasurable emotion. And then the sadder sequence! For it had come to her then that a woman seasoned, sophisticated, settled, who would marry a boy ten years her junior — and such a boy — would be either a knave or a fool.

And yet to get on without her? She knew he could n't afford it then. Could she, on the other hand, get on without him? She had made her peace with herself, through the next three years, with what she had given — the balance to his chaotic impulse, the spur to his ambition. She had so lived into his interests, so made herself identified with them, that she had lost sight of her old dread of changing circumstance.

Six months ago, when she had left London, she had been so secure in his allegiance — an allegiance so settled, so taken for granted, that its first significance was almost lost sight of — that the separation had not given her a passing anxiety. Now she asked herself if his mad dash with the Gretrys across an ocean and a continent was to have brought him to her again merely to shake her faith in that allegiance.

The slamming of the car door brought her back shrewdly to her surroundings. She looked up. In the pictures of her memory Longacre had figured always as a boy, a Viennese student as she had seen him first. Now the sight of him as he was, coming down the aisle upon her, struck her as freshly as the impression of a stranger. He was no longer youth, painted in full curves and raw colors, but young maturity grayed over, sharp-lined, strenuous with the vital endeavor he had put into living.

He seemed to be catching up the years between them. She had a quick revulsion. She asked herself, if, after all —

Cissy Fitz Hugh was yawning prettily, stretching herself awake.

"We 'll be in in five minutes," Longacre said, his hand on the back of Florence Essington's chair. "Will you have your cloak?"

CHAPTER II

JULIA STEPS OUT OF IT, AND ANSWERS A QUESTION

NIGHT had come down in a smother of fog made infinitely dreary by the interminable sound of the sea. The two light rigs that had sped on the sand road, through the thick oak shadows, now spun sharply over the crisp gravel of the ascending drive toward the "Miramar" lights, trembling in misty penumbra. The house loomed immediately above, huge, undefined, confused in its lesser masses of trees. It seemed so shut up against this dreary outside that it made not even a sign of welcome to the arrivals under the porte-cochère.

Florence, as Longacre lifted her from the cart, felt the damp of his greatcoat chill through her glove. She saw him, mounting the wide wooden steps in the band of light from the veranda windows, haloed with silvery moisture. The veranda presented the appearance of a deck cleared for action. All the graces of hammocks and cushions, removed, left a sentinel row of reversed cane chairs against the wall. Somewhere out in the dark a tree dripped steadily.

She felt her hair cling to her cheek.

Cissy Fitz Hugh in her frills was limp as a wet doll, and prettily cross.

"They must have heard us, with all that row on the gravel!" she fretted. "There—at last!"

The door had opened, presenting them precipitately with the heart of the house—the big wainscoted living-hall, rugged, divaned, firelit, and full of people. They were not really more than a dozen, the women in, golf-shirts, the men in shooting-coats and leggings — the flotsam and jetsam of a day's sport made sociable with tea.

Their high, cheery babble just paused and caught its note again as Mrs. Budd, hard upon the heels of the maid who had opened the door, fairly pounced upon her belated guests, and sucked them in to a pleasant snapping of talk and wood fires. Her tall, robust figure in its red golf-waistcoat bristled with welcomes.

"Now I *know* you 're drenched! The fog 's a perfect *rain!* I 'm *so* glad."

She kissed Cissy warmly, her eyes snapping meanwhile from Florence to Longacre.

"Come straight to the fire. Do come to the fire, Mrs. Essington, and Agnès shall take your wet things."

Alert for impending introductions, she half turned to Florence with the name of a guest at her lips, but Florence had already been cut off from the rest of the party by a large man with his hands in the sagging pockets of an old shooting-coat. He had at the same time, in an incredibly short space, furnished her with tea, and now stood above her while she drank it, rocking softly to and fro on his feet, and talking steadily. Occasionally he gesticulated with a large, open hand.

Cissy Fitz Hugh had gone her own way some distance into a number of conversations. It devolved upon Longacre to be led about the circle with a name here and a name there, and a blur of presences that vexed his continental habit, and left him, at the finish, still face to face with his hostess.

She promptly cast upon the shore of conversation the first drift of her own interest.

"And what in the world has become of *Julia!*" she exclaimed. She almost challenged him with it. "You *would* think two hours would be enough to ride round 'Tres Pinos,' especially with her friends coming — and *all* this fog!"

Her smile stayed with him while her eyes roved to the windows. She was notably expectant, but not, as Longacre seemed to sense it, so anxious as would be natural to a mother whose daughter has chosen the coast road on a thick night. While he said something amiable about the safeness of sand roads and the instinct of a horse, he felt that he was looking hardly less expectant than she.

"And where 's dear Julia?" Cissy Fitz Hugh's voice preceded her into the group.

"Oh, Julia — "

The name, tossed back and forth, arrested Florence Essington's attention.

"Julia is a very naughty child," Mrs. Budd happily proclaimed. "She *said* she would be home by five, and then she made me promise not to wait tea for her." Her eloquent hands deprecated those of the clock, which pointed to half after six. "And now she 's hardly time to dress for dinner!"

"Julia," said Holden, turning his large

head on his shoulder, "may come to dinner in her riding-boots, so long as she comes."

"Just what *I've* always said, Mr. Holden," Cissy seconded. "Dear Julia—"

"Well, there they are!" cried Mrs. Budd, her eyes flying to the door. Holden opened it on the white darkness.

Two voices, basso and falsetto, were calling through the fog. Two horses were backing and sidling at the steps. Then a tall young woman came laughing and stamping through the open doorway.

The magnetism of her bounding vitality touched Florence Essington before she looked; for her first look was to Longacre. He was suddenly brightened, more interested in what he was saying to Cissy Fitz Hugh; and Florence, seeing, had a sensation of loneliness, of desertion, that amounted to antagonism as she turned her eyes to the girl. The feeling ached through her pure pleasure in the other's extraordinary beauty.

Julia was hatless. Her hair, crystalled with mist, stood off her forehead in a glistening bush. That dark, back-brushed nimbus gave the suggestion of some great, fine lady of another day. The magnificent sweep of her black brows seemed to dress her forehead. The blood of her vigorous body burned in her crimson cheeks and lips. She moved in an atmosphere of vital energy. She dominated the room.

Her mother seemed scarcely able to keep her hands off her.

"Why, *darling*, what is the matter? *Why* are you so late?"

"Awfully sorry, mama. We could n't help it. Mr. Thair could n't see the face of his watch.— How d' y' do, Mrs. Fitz Hugh. — Besides, the ocean was too splendid!"

"But where is your hat, pet?" Mrs. Budd still hovered, tender and voluble.

"Blew off," said Julia, blithely. "Mr. Thair tried to find it, and nearly lost himself in the fog. Bless you, mother, we could n't see our saddle-pommels!"

"Here 's Mr. Longacre," murmured her mother, remindingly.

The girl gave him a full hand-clasp. Her spirits seemed to take another leap.

"Why did n't you come down earlier, Mr. Longacre? We should have given you a run for your money."

"Oh, there 'll be another night like this for me," said Longacre, with confidence.

Mrs. Budd looked at him with dim dismay, but the entrance of Charlie Thair diverted her. Lean, keen, and smiling, his unusually animated, not to say joyous, bearing gave her reassurance. Her eyes traveled to Julia for confirmation, but Julia was disconcertingly oblivious of Thair's presence. Her vivid gestures and high animation were all for Longacre. Mrs. Budd's forehead showed a cleft of anxiety not to be erased by her most scrupulous smiles. Among the groups, dispersing to dress for dinner, she tried to reach her daughter; but the girl had been swept up-stairs, the center of a knot of women. The slow-moving Holden detained Mrs. Budd until she had left hardly that allotted time in which the most expeditious woman can be groomed and gowned.

But Mrs. Budd was superior to time in point of determination. She hurried her maid to the woman's distraction, and half an hour before the first of her guests could be expected she knocked at her daughter's door.

Julia was in a white and crimson combing-gown, with her hair streaming; but she had not yet removed her wet riding-boots, and there was, to Mrs. Budd's eye, something distressingly indiscreet in such footgear appearing from the folds of a peignoir.

"Oh, Julia *dear!*" she remonstrated.

Julia laughed, and offered a spurred heel to the maid. "I can't bear to take them off," she said.

"You *did* have a nice time, did n't you, pettie, in spite of the dripping fog and the dreadful wind! But I should have been anxious if you had been with any one but Charlie Thair. You *did* have a nice time, did n't you?"

"Magnificent! Uproarious!"

"Oh, *not* uproarious!" her mother protested.

"Yes, really. I should think you would have heard us! We sang, 'The Hounds of Maynell,' from the landing to the lighthouse as hard as we could shout. We got the triple echo to saying all sorts of things. And then —" she paused, fitting her feet into white satin shoes, while Mrs. Budd agonized in suspense —" well, then, when we got out to 'Tres Pinos' there was such a surf we simply had to yell to make each other hear. And there," concluded Julia, with a flourish of animation, quite as though she had reached the climax of her tale — "*there* my hat blew off."

Mrs. Budd threw her hands in her lap with a gesture of resignation not lost upon her daughter.

"And Charlie was such a dear!" Julia smiled tenderly at the toe of her shoe, and Mrs. Budd gathered a faint hope.

"He piled off his horse and fell around in the fog for half an hour, and nearly drowned himself, till I said, 'Oh, let it go,' and he said, 'All right, young madam,' and off we went."

Mrs. Budd's expression of acute disappointment arrested her daughter's attention. "Why, what did you expect he did, mama? Surely not something horrid?"

"Indeed, no. I 'm quite certain, Julia, if Charlie Thair ever did *anything* at all, it could not be horrid."

Julia stared a minute at this ambiguous paradox. Then she chuckled.

"I never liked him so much, mama. I got him all waked up. He did n't have any time to be witty or tiresome. And on the way home what do you think he said?"

Mrs. Budd hung upon the revelation.

"He said," Julia continued, with a touch of pride, "that I was awfully good sorts, if I was a beauty. Now was n't that nice of him, mama?"

Mrs. Budd gasped. There were almost tears in her reply.

"My dear Julia, you *must* not encourage that sort of attitude in a man. You must not forget that you are no longer a child. And I don't at *all* approve of your stramming round the country, singing at the top of your lungs, in your second season! Suppose you had met those people driving up from the station!"

"Who is the woman who came with Mr. Longacre?" Julia inquired irrelevantly.

"Oh, that 's Mrs. Essington, Kitty Wykoff's daughter. Kitty married her to some Englishman — a wretch! She 's lived in

London for years. She knows Mr. Longacre. I 'm so *glad* she 's come! I don't know what we should have done with him if she had n't! He 's queer as 'Dick's hatband'!"

"*Queer?*" Julia threw the word out like a missile.

"Oh, I don't know," Mrs. Budd said vaguely. "He 's written an opera, and when he *does* talk one can't always make sure of what he means. And look at his neckties!" Mrs. Budd's eloquent gesture condemned them out of hand.

"There 's nothing the matter with his neckties," said her daughter, coldly. "I hear some one going down, mama."

"Well, I don't know *what* it is," her mother threw over her shoulder; "but if they were *quite* right, one would n't notice them."

After the door had closed on Mrs. Budd's glittering wake, the girl stood motionless, her eyes on her mirror. But her conscious sight was turned inward. She was struggling to recall a clear image of the neckties, which she was certain *she* had never noticed. What was it about them her mother so earnestly deplored? But her mental vision persisted in rising above the garment in question to the eyes that could look so steadily without staring; and through those eyes she began to see her own. Shining hazel shot with hot yellow replaced the blue — two flowering cheeks, and a crimson line of lips. Presently these smiled at her.

She drew back a step, turned half away from the glass, looked again, wriggled her white shoulders luxuriously in her lace bodice, held the hand-mirror high, and, brows drawn to one black line, earnestly contemplated her own profile.

Then she smiled, threw the glass on the dressing-table, and turned to the door.

She had a pleasant excitement in the

thought of meeting Longacre. Those cool, blue eyes she had vaguely felt to be a bit critical through their admiration. They roused in her the child's impulse to "show off," to surprise them into unreserved praise. Other men were satisfied to find her beautiful, but he seemed to require more. Well, he should see, she thought, with a shake of her darkly burnished head.

He loomed so large to her mental vision that when she actually saw him he seemed small and quiet, less than she had expected — yet (the eyes again) somehow more. He was opposite her at dinner. She caught herself comparing his tie with Thair's, relieved to find them identical, to see, as Longacre's head turned toward the woman on his right, that the blond hair, longish over the forehead, was clipped close behind the ears. Correct as one could wish; and yet, her mother had said he was queer. Well, he was — different, odd. She felt ashamed of her inventory, but — well, a man could not afford to be odd.

She reproached herself. He would not condemn her for — wearing lawn over satin. But again, he would — if she sang a false note. Well, he should see!

They had not exchanged a word between the time she had come down and the serving of dinner; but with coffee in the drawing-room she asked him casually if he would play an accompaniment.

Longacre was vaguely dismayed. He had not known that Julia sang. He abhorred drawing-room songs, built to show the voice as a stage gown to show the figure. At the worst, he felt he could not forgive her. At the best, it must be less beautiful than she. And that *he* should second such a performance! He felt he had changed color. He said he would be delighted. So far, he rose to her conventional ideal. It would not, he felt, have been so bad had they two been alone together; but all these people coming in, murmuring, looking expectant, made a show of it, in which he seemed, to himself, exhibiting Julia, at her worst, to — well, Florence Essington at her best. He fancied the girl's cheeks were hot, her hands nervous as they skimmed the music.

The song she chose was some selection from a modern Italian opera, a passionate, melancholy thing.

All through the long prelude he found himself expecting and dreading her voice.

When it came at last it bewildered him. It was everything he had not expected, liquid, pliant, full, unerringly true in its leaps and falls through alarming intervals, astonishingly trained. But it chilled him, distressed him, so much more disappointed him than he had feared. It failed in the one thing he had made sure of. The voice was a lovely, hollow shell of sound. Could not a creature with her strong pulse of life, her gorgeous senses, put more of herself, of her passion, into her voice? His accompaniment sang the composer's meaning with keener comprehension than she, he thought savagely as his fingers fell on the last chord.

But the approval, the banalities, the applause, were all for the singer. They must have it again, Mrs. Budd's guests.

But Julia, looking covertly at Longacre, whose approval alone was withheld, refused brusquely. No, she told Mrs. Fitz Hugh, the most voluble of the group around her, she would not sing again to-night. She looked laughing and triumphant, standing separated from him by the people.

He felt irritated, out of tune with everything. The evening that had promised so well was spoiled. But as he turned from the piano Julia was suddenly at his elbow, still flushed, but now her voice was weak in her murmur.

"You did n't like it, did you?"

It was hard to meet her eyes, yet he experienced a swift pleasure, as if one in whom he had feared to be disappointed had not failed him, after all.

"It 's not as beautiful as you," he said simply.

His sincerity startled her.

"Does it have to be that for you to stand it?" She tried to laugh it off.

"N-no-o — but," he hesitated — "it 's because — because I could forgive you every fault but the one."

That odd, intimate way he talked amazed her. She had never heard anything just like it. It was unconventional — oh, *queer!* She felt her color rising, but she stayed.

"Is it the method?" she ventured.

How young she was, he thought; how could one put it!

"The method is all right," he said, "and the voice is lovely; but how can you sing that song when you don't know what it means,— or sing anything, when you don't know, yet, what anything means?"

Then he saw he had tried too much. Generations of convention rose up to cut off her instinct for what he was saying.

"I 'm afraid I don't know what *you* mean," she murmured. Her eyes had fluttered fearfully from his, caught Thair's across the room. In answer to their unconscious distress, Thair quizzically smiled. He came dawdling across to where Julia and Longacre stood, by this time conspicuously isolated.

Longacre turned not too graciously to this approach, and saw that their situation had drawn another regard. Mrs. Essington, just quitted by Thair, was looking, and she too, he fancied, not without a smile.

CHAPTER III

MRS. ESSINGTON RUNS AWAY FROM HERSELF

FLORENCE ESSINGTON woke with a flood of early sun across her bed, and the sound of the ocean in her ears. But the fringes of hardy yellow jessamine around her windows smothered the salt smell of it. The air of the room suggested gardens, and the sea sound was but a background for the clear human voices a-chatter somewhere among the hydrangeas and heliotrope. The out-of-doors invaded the house in a positive summons. A dozen retrospections had lifted and dissolved with the fog.

Her veins seemed distended with fresh blood, her heart quickened with the sharp chorus of wild canaries, the chattering flights of linnets flashing across her window. She asked her reflection in the glass if a woman who appeared fresh at seven in the morning could well accuse herself of age? Her foot was like a young girl's on the wide stair descending to the reception-hall. That sharp, exquisite freshness that a wet night leaves behind it met her on the threshold.

The house stood back in the billow of a hill. The drive rushed in wide sweeps down a glittering greensward dashed with dark oaks that thickened to a belt at the base of the hill, where the road cut whitely through them; beyond, the cypresses standing up against the blue circle of sea, and the fog, a continent of pearl and shadow, stealing back across the ocean's floor. It hid the southern horizon, but northward she could see the sunlight on the windows of Santa Cruz. She looked over the whole semicircle of sea and shore. The length of the coast, trembling out of sight in a quivering mist of spray; the unending hill and hollow, lifting and falling away into the sky; the everlasting, encompassing ocean, lifted her out of herself with their power of infinity. The sparkle of the sea drew into her eyes. The buoyant spirit of a joy that only breathes under a new-risen sun was reflected in her face.

But the small sounds of things near and finite, drumming persistently on her ears, at last made themselves audible, growing upon her attention until she found herself listening to a murmur of talking, broken now and then by a rich, vibrant note of laughter. She heard it first as a little part of her pleasure of sight and sound, but presently some disturbing reminder in it, some painful memory, distracted her; finally turned, first her face, then her feet, in the direction of the flower-planted western terrace.

With a few steps she had the talkers in sight,—Thair, his riding-crop slashing at the ragged chrysanthemums; Julia Budd, a sheaf of heliotrope in one arm; and Longacre, whose hand, while Thair talked, plucked and plucked and strewed the path with the small purple blossoms of one of the hanging sprays.

Florence paused, her impulse to join them somehow quenched.

Thair, with his genial talk, seemed to have no association with the other two. He might as well have been somewhere else. Though the girl's face was turned toward the sea, and Longacre's eyes were on the heliotrope, they seemed, by something akin in expression, somehow sharply, intimately drawn together.

Florence saw them thus for a moment. Then Julia turned, Longacre looked up at her, their eyes met. The spirit of the girl's voice had shot Florence with sharp misery; but it was the full look of Longacre's eyes that, had they moved a hair's breadth from Julia's face, would have seen Florence standing, looking through the passion-vines, that held her for a minute still, and staring. Then noiselessly, like an eavesdropper, she retreated. She felt wretchedly that she had spied on him, had interrupted something not meant for her to see. She had an overwhelming impulse to escape the confines of flowers and voices, a need of something not less large and bitter than the sea. It was not thought, but impulse that directed her steps, that turned them so precipitately down the drive. Near the end of the grounds she began to run. Under the shelter of the oaks she slackened her pace, but her gait still had a headlong haste, and only when she broke from the fringe of foliage out upon the slope of sand, with the green waves bowing and breaking at her feet, did she stop to get breath.

Even then she did not look back over the way she had come, but out across the water that had grown less blue than gray. The only thing before her was that she had seen another receive what she had thought her own. Intolerable! It goaded her to motion. Blind to seeing, deaf to hearing, incapable of thought, she hurried down a space of endless sound and emptiness. Oh, to get away from herself! She ran to outstrip herself, that self that could only remember the look in the garden, that could only endlessly repeat that she had lost him! It was upon her, the possibility she would not face yesterday. It had her unawares. She could not endure it!

She ran. Before her tripped a sandpiper, his fine web of footprints following him. Shadows of gulls, swept across the sand, were like great blown leaves.

She had put her whole life into a failure! She had lost him!

She heard the soft sucking of wet sand under her feet. The point of rocks before her made three ragged steps down to the sea.

Above them that cypress had a shape of human agony. The breakers rising over the lower rock were like a succession of slippery, watery stairs meeting the stones. And oh, the thunder of the coast!

The strong voice of the ocean, the breakers' shock, the biting taste, the long sigh of subsiding waves, the eternal iteration of great sounds, encompassed her. Wild, unthinkably vast! Ordered commotion! Inevitable change! What, in the face of sky and sea, did it matter if this one man loved one woman, or another?

"One man, one man!" She said it over. And his voice, his face, and small forgettable things — tricks of eye, of manner — came back upon her and possessed her. The woman the years had made rose in her. The man was hers. Because she had willed it, the boy had been drawn to her; because of her, again, he had found himself; with her he had fashioned the beginning of his man's life; he and she had laid the foundations of it.

Could she let go all that had been so understandingly wrought to — what? Had the girl anything but her glorious flesh — any latent possibility of power to meet his need? She asked herself, with increasing calm, could she be sure her stimulated imagination had not deceived her. But when that look of his had first been hers, had she not known it as a fact, tangible as a hand to grasp? And was she so feeble as to repudiate the new fact because it stung?

No! She saw laid on him, ever so lightly, the touch of a younger, stronger vitality; and yet how fully aware was he? She knew so well his oblivious self-absorption, his mind incurious, slow to recognize the possibility of change. They had so grown to take each other for granted. She knew that anything threatening their mutual dependence could not come to him and leave him steady.

But her own position? It was that she sought in the labyrinth of her mind; but where reason had been was only a succession of violent emotions. She had been generous while she had been sure of him. Now the feeling of right that custom gives, the passion of possession, was fermenting in her. It consumed everything else.

What her strength could hold was hers. She wondered how strong she was. The strength of suffering! The wisdom of failure! Oh, she would hold him! How long? She put it away.

She turned back along the ringing beach. It was better, she thought, to be rooted like the cypress, even to be fastened in a great melancholy unrest, than to be as one of the gulls, flying on every wind, fishing at random.

The fog was lifting toward the north. The coast showed dark under it. There was something sterile in the thin black line of land across the waste of water, but she faced it rather than the deep-bosomed, soft-shadowed hills. But when, perforce, she turned her back on it to climb the "Miramar" terrace by a path through the oaks, she felt her high tension relax, a less triumphant confidence. Yet her eyes were calm, her pulse steady; she held her determination unwavering. Life thus far had taught her that of tenacity was the habit of success.

CHAPTER IV

LONGACRE RUNS AFTER

STEPPING on to the veranda, Florence found herself in a projected atmosphere of breakfast — the fine aroma of coffee, the strident gaiety of people not too well known to one another and denied the solace of breakfast in their rooms.

Mrs. Budd's country house was thrown together with the directness, the inconsequence, and the charming frankness of the lady herself. There were no corners, no intricacies of passage, no glooms. One step from the veranda and you were in the midst of it. You were entirely surrounded by the open stairs to the chambers, the double drawing-rooms on the left, the dining-room and library on the right, with the "glass room" giving on the garden behind it. You saw them all at a glance, and saw them in an even flood of light from the lightly curtained, large, plain windows.

From the living-hall Florence saw, through the double doors, a triangular vista of the breakfast-room. The table, drawn squarely in front of the open French windows, was dappled with sun. She got an impression of colors and motions, and the automatic movement to and fro of the starched white blouse of the Chinese butler.

She distinguished but two faces, Julia's and Longacre's. They were fronting the door, back to the full flood of sun, and again she saw them together, as though detached from the people around them. Julia was talking, but more aware of whom she talked to than what she said. Longacre seemed hardly to listen. He kept looking at her.

Florence felt again a tightening throat. She got a long breath. She realized that Mrs. Budd had suspended her flow of conversation with Holden, and had fixed on her a smile of absent welcome. She indicated the vacant place at Holden's right, and hurried an inquiry of how her guest had slept into a breathless demand as to how she preferred her coffee.

Florence found herself fronting Longacre, who was pent between Cissy Fitz Hugh's pettish prettiness and Julia's accented gaiety. He looked up at Florence as if he had come out of a dream. His eyes met hers across the table, whimsically asking: Was n't it, after all, just the jolliest, stupidest possible lark? But she did not answer the look. She would n't. The smile that she did give him was a mere good morning, the same as she had given Holden when he drew back her chair for her. Her whole attention seemed for Thair, who had immediately turned on her the genial impudence of his odd, light eyes that seemed to see consummately through half-closed lids.

"You are truly the most extraordinary person," he was saying. "One sees you in the first flush of day half a mile on the road to the sea. And presently you come in, straight from the fountain of youth, and remember immediately how many lumps you take in your coffee."

"And you — " She just hesitated. She saw Longacre still looking at her — "are too delightfully naïve!" Her eyes returned to Thair's mocking face. "It 's not a medicine one permits one's self before breakfast."

He laughed with whetted interest.

"What will you have? I am all at your commands."

"Mercy, Charlie," Cissy cut in, "I should think you 'd know all any one expects of you is to be amusing!" She glanced maliciously at Mrs. Budd.

"Can you prove your reputation for wit?" Florence asked him.

Thair leaned back, chin up, eyes down. He was enjoying himself.

"The reputation for wit," he proclaimed, "hangs on the things a man *has* said, and the things you hope he 'll presently say. He 's like the 'white queen' in what-'s-its-name — jam yesterday, jam to-morrow, but never jam to-day."

"Speaking of jam," Julia plumped in nonchalantly, "will you please pass me the marmalade, Mr. Thair? (Never mind, Wong!) Mama," she called across the table, "has it been decided whether we are to ride or drive over to the links?"

The question caught an undercurrent of attention through the talk. Not that the method of progression so much mattered to the breakfasters, as the company in which they traveled. They hung upon Mrs. Budd as the arbiter of their fate.

"Why, both, pet." The hostess's glance flashed upon her guests at large, though her reply, obviously, was limited to her daughter. "I have ordered the surrey. That and Mr. Thair's machine take half of us, but you young people will, of course, prefer your saddles."

"You 'll ride?" Holden murmured to Florence.

She looked down at his big, blunt hand, resting on the table.

"Did you say your horses were here?"

"Why, yes, the span are. Drove 'em down from Palo Alto." He was eager "Would you rather — "

The tail of his sentence was lost in Julia's clear voice.

"Bess and I are going in the 'red devil,'" she announced. Thus a queen might proclaim her progression.

The blooming, blonde creature included in this edict threw a nervous glance at Thair. But he was all amiable irony.

"You are the leading conspirator for my happiness." He bowed across to Julia.

Florence divined who might be expected to fill the fourth place in the automobile. It might have been that possibility which ruffled Cissy Fitz Hugh's forehead. But Cissy's endeavors never failed from lack of confidence.

"Well, really," she observed pathetically, "it 's such a magnificent morning, I think I shall make *one* effort to ride over. Don't you think it 's an *ideal* morning for a gallop?" She appealed to Longacre.

"Well, you make it seem so," he said, with one of his gentle, misleading looks. It misled both Cissy and Julia. It left one complaisant, the other a little more like a princess than usual. But Florence knew just what that look signified. When he was going to escape he was always like that. Unconcerned about the little arrangements of life, he habitually took them as they were offered, but Florence knew he had no idea of riding over as Cissy's escort.

She suspected he had lost the chance of a fourth place in Julia's arrangement. How he intended to escape Cissy she guessed from his look at herself, questioning her.

She gave him a vague, inquiring smile, and turned to answer Thair. She knew Longacre would speak to her after breakfast. He did. In the general exodus to the veranda she found him at her elbow, a little quizzical, a little puzzled.

"Are we going to gallop over together?" he asked, as if he were stating a certainty.

"Why, are n't you with Mrs. Fitz Hugh?" she said, with light surprise.

"I?" He was puzzled to know if she were serious. "Lord, I 'm going to dodge her!"

"With me? But, Tony—I 'm so sorry—I 've promised Mr. Holden to drive over with him."

"Holden!" Longacre looked, as he felt, outraged. "But I thought, of course—"

"Why?" Florence wondered. "*Did* you speak of it?"

"No — but I thought, of course, that we would — oh, well!" he flung out, sulky as a boy.

"Oh, *here* he is!" Cissy Fitz Hugh, compressed into her habit like jelly into a mold, was upon them. Her hand was lightly on Longacre's sleeve.

"Mr. Colton wants to put me up," she complained, "but *I* said no one shall — but *my* cavalier!"

"Now, really, Mr. Longacre," Mrs. Budd's voice burst forth from the other side, "I don't know what sort of a mount you prefer."

She indicated the group of horses crowding away from the gibbering road-machine that ground into the porte-cochère with Thair's hand on the throttle. Thair's humorous regard was for Longacre's predicament. Too late, it seemed to say, to escape from such a veteran as Cissy.

When the riders headed the procession down the steep dip of the drive, Cissy's blonde head was nodding and ducking to Longacre's passive profile with such calm assurance of how cleverly she had managed it, that Florence Essington could not repress a smile.

Holden, who, at the instant, had pulled up his horses at the steps, took the expression to himself with simplicity. The concentration with which he took in what was immediately before him, without regard to things behind or beyond, was a relief to her. Now his hands were so full of his horses that he had hardly a glance for her. The impatient sorrels were making preliminary attempts to run over the groom at their bits.

"Can you make it?" Holden said, as he brought the runabout to momentary quiet.

She was in with the dart of a swallow.

The groom sprang aside, and Florence felt herself precipitated, as in one plunge, toward the sea.

"Hey, hey!" Holden growled under his breath. The reins were taut, and his arm, brushing her shoulder, was as stiff as steel. The animals, curbed and quivering, danced down the slope like fine ladies, shaking their heads with a vague threat of another outburst.

"They 're crazy for a run," Holden murmured caressingly. "We 'll have to head that procession," and he nodded toward the group stringing through the gate.

"That is what I should like," said Florence.

"Then we 'll put them clean out of sight," he answered.

They passed the foremost riders as these were swinging into the coast road, and for a few moments Florence saw oaks and ocean as a blur of olive-green pierced with flashes of bright blue.

"Too fast?" Holden inquired, his eyes on the horses' ears.

"It could n't be!" she answered with excitement.

The rapid motion was what her mood needed to fire it. It lit a spark in her cold, lethargic determination. She was possessed with that feeling of triumph speed creates—a physical elation, a surety that nothing in life could stand still again. A faint color grew in her cheeks. Her eyes had a fire that seldom burned in their somber pupils; a color and a fire that Holden marked in his greater leisure, with the slackened speed of the horses rising the steep hill.

"You look so lit up," he told her, half wonderingly.

"It 's the driving," she explained, "or rather flying. We hardly seemed to touch earth."

"Just driving!" He was amused. "Well, I like it. It 's my play. It 's famous to have a strong, lively pair of brutes under your hand to hurry or pull up as you like."

Florence looked as though that pleasure were quite within her comprehension.

"But," he added, with another look at her glowing face, "it would take the biggest deal in the country to make me feel within twenty miles of the way you look."

"Oh, do I look all that?" She seemed so to comprehend! He warmed under the kindness of her fancy.

"You know I want above all things to please you," he began.

"Are n't we friends enough not to have to please each other?" she quickly interposed. She wanted so to keep him off that dangerous ground.

"You people have such a way with words!" he protested, with a head-shake as large and impatient as a bull's.

"We people?" she demanded with gay asperity.

"Oh, all *that* crowd!" He jerked his head backward, in the direction of the party following.

"And you insist on classing me?" she persisted.

"You know," he replied obstinately, "as far as I 'm concerned, you 're in a class by yourself. I 've told you all about that before." As they began the descent his hands tightened on the reins.

She looked seaward over the low live-oaks.

"You can't for a moment suppose," he went on, "that I *class* you with them. You know their sort. You know how to meet them; but I believe at bottom you 're more like me."

"That may be, too," she said gently; "but — "

"Do you know, that 's the way you always answer me!" he struck in. "You won't put a definite period to a sentence."

"Because you won't let me come to the end of it," she said quickly. She wanted to avert the last appeal. She wished to have all clear between them, but instinctively she dreaded the finality. "The difficulty is that I 'm not enough like you; and we two are mature; we won't change; we can't adjust ourselves as younger people can."

"I ought to know by this time how much or how little alike we are," he determined.

"Is it such a long time?" she doubted.

"Six months."

"Yes, but what did the months in New York amount to? A porridge of things and people! Did we have time to breathe? We simply rushed from place to place, throwing at each other the last opinion on the latest thing."

"I knew what I wanted then," he retorted.

"But you did n't know *me*."

"Don't you think I know the sort you are?" he demanded.

"Not quite." And, as he repudiated her words with his large head-shake, she added, "At least, if you *will* take the consequences of cornering me, I 'm not at all sure I know what *you* are like."

He seemed to consider this more natural.

"I 'll tell you all you want to know in that quarter, and tell you straight." He pinned her with his direct look.

She tried to retrieve his misconception of her meaning.

"Oh," she said, "you can't. You would have to show me."

They whirled under the cypresses at the entrance to the golf-links. The club-house, so low, and so widely roofed with tiles that it appeared to crouch under a red umbrella, gave them just the glimmer of the upper row of its windows over the hill-crest.

"And how long a time will it take to show you?" said Holden.

It came to her how unescapable he was; what significance had his direct mind read into her replies? She was grave, with a certain distress and indecision in her face.

"I can't tell. I mean you must not ask me to — you must not expect — I cannot — "

But he would not have it.

"Oh, well, if time 's what you want!"

"Do you go at your deals as hard as this?" she smiled.

"Worse than this," he said earnestly. "There 's no consideration there — much worse."

"Worse!" cried Cissy Fitz Hugh, catching the word as she and Longacre, foremost of the riders, came abreast the runabout.

"Golf — worse than railroad deals," replied Florence so quickly that Longacre, who had had time to note Holden's annoyance, gave her a long consideration.

"But you don't stay out of a game because it 's hard, Holden," he said. "Suppose we make a foursome."

Florence felt a quickened heart — a thrill that was more than excitement, too keen for joy. Had he looked at Holden as at a rival? Was he trying, this negligent Longacre, to arrange to speak with her, to be near her? Did he miss her so much? He must miss her more.

He handed her out at the club veranda, both her hands in his, and she could not help giving him one of her old looks. It got away from her. She saw him flush under it. It went to his head.

She kept close to Holden. She walked out to the tee with him, as inconsequently happy, and, she told herself, as silly, as a girl. She knew that Longacre had builded on his knowledge that, while he and she played a fairly fast game, Cissy was a notably wild shot and Holden a duffer. But Florence chose to assume Holden to be her partner, again relegating Cissy to Longacre; and she waived to Cissy the right of the first drive, which, though wild, covered a long space in a forward direction. Longacre's face, flushed, quivering with irritation, his drive off — a smashing crack that sent the ball a spinning streak — were with her memory over all the course, but she managed her game to keep just from blocking Holden's, seeing Longacre well away at the second green as the greater party came out to the tee.

Diligently coaching Holden, she managed to keep far enough ahead of all but one, the most hardy, the most headlong player on the links. Florence felt pursued and hurried on by that ringing voice, detaching itself in her ears from all other sounds and voices. "Fore!" it rang out, vibrant, musical, across the brown downs.

Looking back from her advance to where

the play was more congested, she could see the tall figure whose vigor and presence seemed to dominate the links. Florence felt herself sunk in the background of Julia Budd's identity. The girl's strokes had rhythm; the movements of her body, harmony. Her voice, that was more a call than a shout, had the sound of half-savage music. Beside her the others seemed triflers. She was splendid in her intensity for the thing in hand, the play — the long swing, the flying ball, the quick pursuit. Florence could feel her waiting at their backs, impatient of delay, her warning " Fore ! " urging them forward.

With this potent personality pressing her hard, Florence went slowly, warily. Her eye measured the distance as she increased or decreased it between herself and Longacre. Her nerves were tight, but the exercise fostered what color the drive had lent her; and her sense of beginning to handle circumstances, that she had feared were slipping past her, gave her an appearance of serenity.

It was this manner of delicate calm, considered with her bright eyes and hot cheeks, that, when she joined the party at luncheon, instantly got Longacre's attention and kept him distracted. She guessed he was trying to explain her mood to himself, without success. She determined to give him no opportunity for discoveries until the hour of her choosing.

She quizzed Thair across the luncheon-table with the early invitation to try his automobile he had extended her, and had not made good.

" I 'll take you up on that," he threatened, "if you 'll honor the 'red devil' as far as 'Del Monte' to-night."

" To the dance? Must we be so precipitate?" she asked.

He insisted.

Cissy Fitz Hugh looked sharply from

Thair to Florence, from Florence to Longacre. After luncheon, while the horses were being brought around, she cornered her cousin. Florence saw Thair amused, protesting, — Cissy positive, insisting. She must have extracted a promise. She turned away with the smile of a kitten over cream.

That look, and the idea it suggested, of what Cissy had been after, gave Florence a sudden disgust of the whole thing — Cissy, her manœuver; herself, her own manœuvers; every one; all scuffling after what they wanted, seeing no further than the next minute. Unprofitable! She would not think.

She drove back to "Miramar," as she had come, with Holden. She went immediately to her room. To sleep was impossible, and she would not — no, could not — think. She walked about the room, picked up and moved about little articles on the writing-desk, the chiffonnier. She watched from her window the line of surf that incessantly built and broke itself along the glittering coast. The fingers that drummed the pane trembled.

She heard voices passing under her window as the tennis-players and bathers followed the afternoon home for tea on the veranda, since the evening was clear. She did not go down. She stood at the window, watching the violet shadows drawing fold over fold of deepening color across the ocean's floor. She had lost herself to such finite things as time. When she came back to it with a start, she was dismayed to see only half an hour left for dressing.

But she dressed with consideration, with anxiety. For full five minutes after the maid had fastened the last hook and pinned the last flower, she revolved before the mirror, studying the coils of dark hair that wrapped her head, and the lines of the lace gown that sloped along her shoulders and rippled, with broken glitters of cut steel, to the floor. When she turned from the glass she was smiling.

CHAPTER V

THE PURSUER IS CAPTURED

SHE was late to a late dinner. She found herself last, but felt herself more looked at than mere lateness warranted. Some of the women looked first at her, and then at each other.

Among the glances given she noted but two — Longacre's and Julia Budd's; though theirs were the eyes least evidently on her.

The girl was in great spirits, rather readier with her rich laugh than usual. Florence was almost betrayed into a straight stare of admiration, of wonder, at all she meant — the arrogance of youth in great beauty that repudiated the need of enhancement, either from the rosy cloud of chiffon in which she had clothed herself, or the mind, hardly awake, under the splendid aura of her hair. How she was sailing on the surface of life! But it occurred to Florence that when she *should* plunge into its depths —!

Longacre leaned across the table with a question to Florence, and she fancied that Julia listened to it. Her eyes and ears were unwontedly keen and sensitive for tones and expressions. The atmosphere was charged with diverse elements. The sense of cross-purposes around the table was as vivid to her mind as, to her eyes, the general disintegration upon the rising, and the confused crystallizations of people.

Cissy Fitz Hugh was already complaisantly established in the back seat of Thair's automobile when Florence came out on the veranda. Groups of men and women stood irresolutely about, as if uncertain what disposition fate was about to make of them. Julia, thrusting on a half-coat of lace, came rushing through the hall with her air of knowing exactly where she was going.

"Why, pettie!" Her mother detained her by one sleeve. "You *must* put on a thicker wrap if you are going in an open vehicle!"

"But I 'm not," said Julia, with a gleam. "I 'm going in the carryall."

Mrs. Budd's helpless "Oh!" was clearly audible.

At this, Cissy, whose mind had evidently contained one doubt as to who would be the other occupant of the back seat, looked contentedly at Longacre handing Julia into her chosen conveyance. He held open the door on the last glimmer of her slippers — then followed her into the carryall. Cissy's rapid change of expression amounted to a grimace. She shot Florence a look of incredulity, craned hastily around at the carryall windows, started to speak; then she stared rather blankly at the blooming Bess who swung into the seat beside her with the confidence of belonging nowhere else.

Florence looked at Thair, and he gave her almost a grin.

"Place aux dames!" he lilted as the "red devil" slid past the carryall.

They headed the procession down the steep drive, the sea wind in their faces, plunging through black and white shadows of moonlight and oaks, catching the flicker of the Monterey lights, finally rolling through the Del Monte gates with the electric stars overhead drawing huge, sprawling silhouettes of banana and palm on the drive in front, and a string-orchestra sounding somewhere beyond the open French windows.

Florence had never felt more alone in her life than on that swarming hotel veranda. She saw Cissy Fitz Hugh with a hand out to a dozen the minute she was out of the automobile — full-necked, close-cropped men; liquid-eyed women with cheeks like peaches and voices like ringing glass; how Cissy seemed to belong among them, to be one of them with an identity eloquent of a dozen summers of common pursuits, gossips, and scandals.

Florence's steel and lace sheared through their softer fabrics like a blade through flowers.

The great rooms were filled, jammed. To the hotel inmates had been added by degrees the parties from the cottages along the shore. The assemblage showed its "mixedness" by the sharp lines of its cliques, made up like a Chinese toy — ring within ring; the outer, whoever could manage a night at the hotel for the sake of a show; the inner, by their sharper individuality of manner and gown and their air of belonging exactly where they happened to be, undoubtedly the show, and supremely regardless of it.

Of them, a woman in heliotrope, with passementerie dragons running up her arms, waved to Florence, and drew her into her shouting group, crying, "You here!" and "Who next where!"

"And where," she wanted to know at the top of her voice, "is the sweet musician — the American with the short hair, who was at your elbow in London?"

"In much the same position," came Longacre's soft drawl over Florence's shoulder.

"The dear impertinence," the lady-dragoness appealed, "of taking that description to yourself!"

"Oh, it was too perfect," he insisted. "The American with the short hair!"

"*And* the sweet musician!" Florence teased. A note in her voice took him back to Vienna and their fresher days. He looked at her. She seemed a reawakened memory — flushed cheeks, and a stinging light in her eyes.

"Oh, the sweet musician" — Longacre was very easy about him — "is pigeonholed in New York."

"What, that dear thing you were playing us catches of last spring?" The dragoness was all vociferous sympathy, but through it he remained aware of Florence Essington's pure profile averted from him, looking across the room toward a gorgeous, rose-like Julia, blooming, the center of a circle of black coats.

But for Longacre, at that moment, the other side of the room might well have been the other side of the world. As the orchestra slid into a waltz of Strauss, and the lady of dragons was drawn away into the measure, he laid an eager hand on Florence's arm, with an "Oh, I say, dance this with *me!*" hard to be denied.

But she nodded across the room toward Thair approaching with long stride and confident smile. "It is promised, but —"

"Well," he frowned, "the next, then."

"Well —" she acceded.

"And the next."

As she hesitated he muttered, "Do you know what I want?" He leaned nearer. "I want the whole evening, as we used — all of 'em!"

"Oh, only that!" she fairly laughed at him.

"This is n't Vienna," she said as she turned away with Thair, but her negation sounded like a promise. She left him — Longacre, who habitually loafed out a ball,—with a desire to dance — to dance wildly, madly, with any one!

Safely and slowly steered around the room in Thair's practised arm, Florence saw him whirling recklessly through the crowd, dancing double time in fine Viennese fashion, twice as fast as the rhythmic swing of the room, with Julia Budd a half-alarmed, half-angry, wholly excited partner. She seemed holding back, objecting; he was urging her on, domineering. He swept her along against her will.

"Oh, no, no; you *don't* want to stop!" Florence heard him laugh as he dashed past. And, catching glimpses of Julia's face as she was whirled along, Florence thought it struggled with a desire, and an inability, to be angry; a confused pleasure in a will stronger than her own.

Mrs. Budd was making covert attempts to attract her daughter's attention. Her expression said that Longacre was proving himself all and more than "queer" included. "Conspicuousness" was her abomination, and there was no doubt that Fox Longacre was making Julia conspicuous.

To Florence it was equally plain that he did not know it. The situation opened before her like a tableau, the climax of the play. She saw Fox and Julia in their excited gyration, not as she had seen them that morning in the garden, but in discord, in different planets of feeling, the girl supremely agitated, Longacre elated. What was the origin of that elation? Florence asked herself. A look of hers — a waft of memory! If she missed the significance of the girl's face, the danger it threatened, it was that she lost it in the tumult of her own feeling.

A word, and she would have been whirling in Julia's place. Still looking at Julia, she blamed herself for holding him off so long. The girl's mere proximity was peril. That was enough to keep any man beside her all the evening. She had more than beauty. She was magnetic. She sunk the women around her to nonentities.

Florence watched Longacre shouldering Julia a passage through the press in the direction of Mrs. Budd's disapproval. He stood a moment talking with the mother and daughter; and as the girl turned her long throat, and bent her black brows upon him, the woman thought, "Of course he will stay. At least he will stay out the interval." He seemed to hesitate, but turned presently and walked on to another group, said a word there, started across the room.

Unconsciously Florence straightened herself. What irrelevant thing she said to Thair she did n't know. She heard him laugh. She was thinking:

"It is only the beginning. I don't know—"

She answered Thair, but all the while was watching Longacre coming across the floor, with a word here and there, and bright, absent eyes. His look found concentration as he paused in front of her. His eyes were more eager than she had seen them for longer than she cared to remember. He was less at ease, too. His looks at Thair were hints. When the returning violins urged that gentleman in the direction of his hostess and his hostess's daughter, Longacre, as if at last released, burst out:

"Now let 's get out of this before any more come along!"

"Any more?" She was composed about it.

"That two hundred pounds of commercialism looking in this direction." He indicated Holden with a sliding eye.

"Why, Tony, what has happened to you?"

"Don't you know?" He was smiling, but well in earnest. "I have n't said a word to you," he pronounced impressively, "for twenty-four hours."

"But why?" She seemed to challenge him with: "Whose fault is that?"

"Because you dodged," he replied coolly. "And unless I look out, you 'll do it again."

"And your suggestion is that we dodge together?"

He rose, and stood in front of her while Holden passed slowly in the crowd, turning his penetrating eye from side to side, but missing them completely.

"Florence," he said, "thaw me out. I 'm

frozen stiff. Come, I 'm stale with self-communications."

He thrust his arm through hers as he drew her around the skirts of the crowd. She felt its urge with a heightened pulse.

"Is n't this rather conspicuously inconspicuous?" she wanted to know as he seated her behind a palm in the crook of a side stair.

"Quite within the limits," he assured her. "Or do you *want* to be interrupted?"

"Tony, you 're almost formal!"

"You make me feel so. You 're a stranger."

Upon this, the curve of her smile was almost childlike.

"Why," he laughed, surprised, "you 're younger than I!"

The glittering butterfly in her hair trembled with her laughter.

"Delicious!" she cried.

"I suppose that 's the youngest thing

that 's been said to-night," he admitted, rueful as a boy, but wholly amused. He looked up at her, and again he seemed to see her anew, alight with an intensity that flashed in her large eyes, that seemed reflected in the glitter of her slow-waving black fan.

"You are the oldest, youngest ever born," she said, with a gentle caress of voice that caused his smile to fade and held his eyes steady.

"What a way you have with words!" he said. "You make them really mean things. You get hold of one —"

"With words," she helped him.

"Oh, no, no; not only that! But the *way* you do it," he said, with his oldest look on his young face. "You get nearer with them. Most only get away."

He alarmed her and reassured her in a breath. "Words?" she thought, remembering Julia's eyes. Yes, words were her weapons, and that which was back of them: the power of mentality. But how much did that count for now?

"You don't like people, Tony," she told him.

He nodded. "I know. They 're such everlasting discords. They deafen me. I suppose it 's infernally selfish, but I can't think of you as an individual, Florence. You 're just myself."

They were too intent now, both of them, for a change of color.

"You know, ever since we came here," he went on, his long fingers running through and through the steel fringes in her lap, "I 've had the oddest sensation of losing myself—of seeing myself escape. Oh, it 's been wretched!" He shook his head.

She paled a little. The meaning under his words—a meaning of which he was unconscious—pierced her.

"Did you, really?" he asked her.

"Did I?" Her voice trembled.

"Try to get away from me?"

Oh, to have been sure *she* had been the reason of his wretchedness!

"Are you accusing me of taking back a gift, Tony?"

The look he gave her swallowed her fears, and the flippancies they engendered.

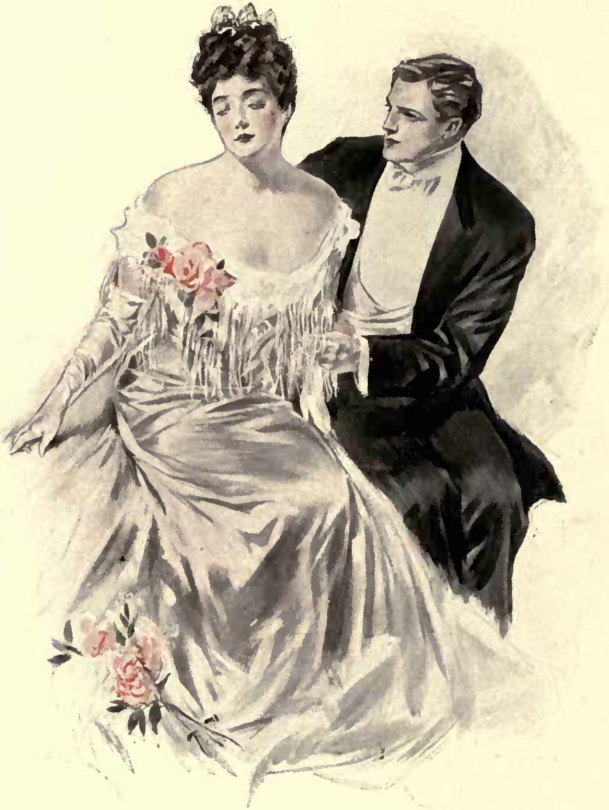
"Florence," he said, "you 've been always giving to me. You never think of getting. You won't even take what belongs to you — myself, the opera, and whatever I may do or be."

"But, Tony, years ago you gave me all that."

"I offered it, and you refused it — on *my* account, you said! What a reason!" He repudiated it with a fierce head-shake. "When you are giving your brain, your strength, your life, why won't you take that much from me?"

"Suppose I should?" She looked at him as if she half feared a recoil of his eagerness;

“‘*Oh, it’s been wretched!*’”



but the blood, mounting to his face, only gave him a more headlong impetuousness. His answer was as direct as Holden could have made: "Is that yes?"

"Why not?" she faltered, her eyes full upon him.

"Good Lord!"—his voice was thick—"then there need be no end to anything!" He stooped with that incalculable impulse of his. She swayed away from him. Her black fan seemed to brush him back.

"'Sh!" her warning hand was on his.

Tall, slightly stooping, Charlie Thair stood between the potted palms, blinking at them out of his narrow eyes. One could not know how much they had seen. They seemed to have seen simply nothing.

"I have," he murmured, "constituted myself a relief expedition. You did very well," he said to Longacre. "I have spent three quarters of a waltz hunting."

"I did the best I could." Longacre's

cheerful impudence covered the situation. "You ought to give up sooner, old man."

Florence felt half shocked, half relieved, to hear them talking thus, as they would have talked if there had been no situation. But she left the responsibility with Longacre. She nodded casually enough to him as she went away with Thair. But, for all her lightness, she could not conceal the evidences of what had happened to her. She dared not give her eyes all the light they knew, and still Thair wondered at their brightness. She could not keep the caress out of her voice. Her laugh lay too near her lips. Her breast heaved too high. She saw that Thair noticed it, but she felt it no longer mattered. Whom she danced with, what she said, she hardly knew. "Is that yes?" she heard Longacre saying, and then her answer: "Why not?"

Why not? Had she thought herself old? Her pulse was a girl's, her color inconstant, her heart quick and irregular. She saw him across the crowd — a look. It was like a hand laid in her own. Was she beginning to live over again? Had he, for what she had given him, repaid her with youth? She was splendid in the flower of her mood.

She saw Julia Budd amid the crowd, distinct from it, yet somehow less vital — a colorful, restless-eyed ghost. Among the dispersing dancers — with the carriages at the door, and the morning faint yellow through the banana leaves — Julia passed her with the others, a dimly disturbing spirit. There was something searching, seeking, baffled in the look she gave Longacre as he helped her into the carryall. He was so vital, so alive, that he seemed to have taken from Julia some of her gorgeous magnetism. But Florence knew it was from another source the vitality had sprung. She was flushed and warm and sparkling with the thought of it. It kept her brilliant through the long ride back in the cold sea wind toward the cold saffron east. She was a whirl of feeling. She rushed along with her sensations as if she dared not think. The spin of the automobile helped her.

But when the rapid motion in the sharp half-light had changed for the long upward house-stair; when Longacre's good night was but the memory of a hand-clasp around her fingers,—then she hurried to escape what was crowding on her elation. She shut the door of her room. She locked it; but the shadow that threatened had been too quick for her. The four walls closed it in. She turned up all the lights in the room. In their glare the shadow was fainter. She drew the curtains over the windows. She shut herself away from the growing light. She saw an image in her glass, a woman who loved, and was loved again, bright-eyed, hectic. The room was too small to hold her. The walls weighed down upon her.

Her heart was too small to hold her happiness. Was it for that reason it ached, that it lay lead in her breast? And the fullness in her throat — tears of joy? It was very near to anguish.

She tried to recall Longacre's face when he questioned, "Is that yes?" But she only saw the confused distraction with which he had answered Julia's seeking look. She knew he belonged to her as never before. But she felt guilty, uneasy, criminal.

She was suffering. She pressed her hands on her smarting eyes, with her old impulse for reason crying, "Why?" What had she done? Whom had she robbed? She had only taken what was hers. Rather, it had been given freely, freely, she told herself insistently. Surely they belonged to each other, herself and the man she loved. What had the other people to do with it? Whom had she wronged?

She flung herself on her bed. The tumult of brain and soul ran out in tears. Triumph, strength, color, hope, were flowing from her; but the figures of the dark spelled out words before her closed, unsleeping eyes — motives that she had obscured, meanings that had been dim.

Whom had she wronged? One figure filled her inturned sight. The man she loved stood there, accusing her. The wrong she had done was between the two of them. To him she must answer.

"What had she done?" the poor ghost seemed to ask.

She had made him. For what? That question stared at her horribly. "For himself," she tried to answer. It had been true in past years, but now it was inexplicably false. For herself, now. She would have hidden from the truth, but it was too quick for her. She lay still, seeing it all, flinching, but looking it in the face.

She had had much to give him; and she

had given it. She had helped him over his hard road — a road which, without her, he might have found too steep and narrow. Now she had come to the end.

How did she know — she broke in passionately upon her reason — that if he wanted her, he no longer needed her? But something deeper than reason, deeper than passion, assured her of the dreary truth. The very years sundered them, and each succeeding year would widen the breach. She, in her prime, in the full power of her faculties and charm — ten years would find her old, years that would leave him young. After — what was there after that?

If she could do no more, if she loved him, must she let him go? That was the bitterest! To step out of the way. To make herself forgotten!

When she rose the east shone palely bright through her windows. She turned out the sickly lights, thrust back the curtains, and let the sharp, merciless morning fill the room.

Seeing her reflection in the mirror, she seemed to face her actual self. Her cheeks were white, the shadows under her eyes bluish; from nostril to mouth the lines were long and hard. But it was easier to look this self in the face than the other of the night before. Here there was nothing hidden, no unknown horror at her back, no shadow to engulf her. Everything was clearly defined. Now that she was in the midst of the shadow, it was less black than gray; but she wondered whether fire would not have been a relief from that interminably dreary hue that infinitely surrounded her.

CHAPTER VI

THAIR PUTS IN HIS FINGER; CISSY HER FOOT

THAIR, lounging down to breakfast the morning after the dance, found Cissy Fitz Hugh alone over a demoralized table. She gave him a nod that was cousinly in its curtness, shoved the muffins a little way toward him, and relapsed into an unwonted obliviousness. Reminiscently smiling, Thair watched her a moment before baiting her gently.

"My good Cicely, you 're not very fit this morning," he presently brought out with family frankness.

She twitched the ruffles of her morning-gown, drew a plump hand up the sweep of her back hair, and launched at him:

"Well, I 'd like to know *who* is after last night! Emma Budd is simply twittering. That great girl of hers is more dreadful than ever! It simply gets on my nerves. They 're all in such a state!"

"Except —" he blinked at her.

"I 'm sure Mrs. Essington looks the worst of the lot."

"Who mentioned Mrs. Essington?" His eyebrows were exclamation-points.

"Well, then who *are* you talking about? I do wish, Charlie, you would sometimes say what you mean!"

"Oh, why, so long as *I*, at least, mean what I say."

"Oh, well, if you 're going to be hateful! You were horrid enough last night!" Cissy whined.

"It was with the best intentions," he assured her.

"Of course! I 've noticed if any one ever does a thoroughly stupid thing, it 's always with the best intentions! And your bundling that *girl* into the back seat with me, when I 'd asked you, and was so counting on Mr. Longacre — when you promised — "

"Oh, why not promise?" His tone was gentle resignation, a wicked consciousness in his half-shut eyes.

"Well, you are a beast!" Cissy gasped. It was outrageous, such outspoken depravity!

"Oh, let me have my finger in the pie," he pleaded. "I wanted your Longacre somewhere else. If he must make love to some one, why not to Julia? It would be so awfully convenient for me, you know."

"Well, he did n't!" said Cissy, triumphantly.

"No, he did not," Thair admitted gracefully. "Nor to you. We all go into the same ditch."

"I don't know what you mean." In their

conversations this was the chronic state of Cissy's intelligence. Thair smiled pleasantly. But her next move brought him up roundly.

"*Who* are you talking about?"

"*Whom?*" He was imperturbably vague about her personal application.

"Who *did* he make love to?"

On this, Thair's air of being delicately shocked was maddening.

"My good Cicely, how should I know? If *you* knew," he pursued with an air of mammoth secrecy, "what I *was* up to —"

But his diplomacy was outstripped by her sharpness.

"Well, I *do* know. So far as any one could see, you spent the evening hunting for —" her flash of revelation snapped the situation like a trap — "Mrs. Essington!"

She leaned across the table, flushed, gaping a little in eagerness. "Well, and you found her!" She threw it straight at him. "Charlie, you *do* know something!"

"Flattered, Cicely; properly flattered." His look was over her shoulder toward the windows.

"One good turn deserves another," he said. "Mrs. Essington is now hunting for us."

Cissy's startled turn gave her, through the expanse of glass, the glimpse of a passing profile, pale against a parasol of rose.

This fleeting profile had seemed to Thair rarely luminous, lighted with a delicate life of its own, an atmosphere excluding the crowd of them. But when she stood in the door he was startled. She was the sharpest, palest, unhappiest substance of the vision. That false radiance of hers was furled in her hand—just an arrangement of silk and sun! Poor dear! Cissy's shot was, after all, nearer the mark. She did look "the worst of the lot."

Vibrating through her house with a roving eye to the agreeable disposition of her guests tucked away among remote book-shelves, and in angles of the veranda, Mrs. Budd had more than ever the air of a great, impulsive girl suddenly smitten with middle age, and trying to make the best of it. She was younger far than Florence Essington, younger than Cissy Fitz Hugh, younger even than her own daughter, whom she presently came upon, teasing the dachshunds on the grass-plot beside the "glass room."

The girl was on her knees. Each separate thread of her gorgeous bush of hair glistening in the dazzle of the late morning sun, her flushing cheeks, her somber brows, her hot, bright eyes, were all a part of the ripple of color and motion she made in the dead, warm greenness. The two long, wriggling dogs threw themselves upon her with yelps and scramblings. She tossed them back, rolled them off their feet, tousled and worried them with gurgles of joy and foolish, tender mutterings.

Her mother's shadow, falling across her, brought up her eyes in a quick flash of recognition.

"Oh, mama, the darlings! Look! The angels! See him snap! Do look — *now*, mama! Oh, you did n't look quick enough!"

Mrs. Budd's eyes absently took in the encircling shrubbery, the walk to their right, thinly veiled with straggling fennel, and came back to her daughter's lovely face with a sort of puzzled helplessness.

"Yes, pettie, yes; they 're very nice. But *what* a way to spend the morning!"

Julia sat back on her heels. Her great brows, curved to a peak, spelled innocent interrogation.

"For mercy's sake, why *not*, mama?"

"Well, I 'm sure I don't know," Mrs. Budd began with a gush, trailing off dimly — "but with so many people about — people to be pleasant to — why should n't you just — be pleasant?"

"Pleasant? Am I *not* pleasant, mama? To whom?"

"Why, everybody, dearie; and — Mr. Thair!"

"But I am pleasant to Charlie Thair, mama. I 'm very, *very* pleasant."

"Yes, yes, pet, you are. Only — how *shall* one tell the child? — not quite, dearie, so pleasant as if you cared —" Mrs. Budd stopped short, a little flustered with her own indelicacy, finishing the sentence with eyes and hands. In all her talks with Julia she had not before come quite so near to putting it plainly. Of the two, Julia, looking gravely into her mother's face, was the least embarrassed.

"But I don't," she said simply.

"But try, pettie; try to!" Mrs. Budd's voice was anxious, pleading. "Mother wishes it *so* much."

Julia bowed her head over the nearest dachshund, turned his collar with deliberate fingers. She was frankly gaining time, casting about for some likely means to put off her own realization of the subject that made the air fairly electric between them.

This she seemed to find in the young man who stepped out of the glass room upon the lawn, a little dazed in the noon glare. Her appeal was a sweet, ringing cry.

"Oh, Mr. Longacre!"

Seeing them together, he stood a minute, seemed to hesitate, then came toward them over the grass; hatless in the sunshine, he looked fair, and a little dreamy. His finger kept the place in his book.

Mrs. Budd surveyed him with a solicitude amounting to annoyance. She turned on her daughter, her mouth shaped for speech, but his quick approach gave her no time. It was Julia who took up the snapped thread of talk in a fluttering sentence:

"It 's my dogs — Mr. Longacre — I — I

wanted you to see them." She was flushed, forehead to chin.

"Oh!" He seemed to just arrive at what was expected of him. "They 're very nice ones."

The flatness of it left all three stranded in uncomfortable silence. The thought in each mind of how much might be said, were one of the others away, kept them from saying anything through an interminable moment that merged unexpectedly into a common interest. It centered in a single figure lounging across the lawn from the breakfast-room.

Thair came slowly, his chin in the air, a dead cigarette in his fingers. Julia frowned. Mrs. Budd rustled. Thair strolled, stopping to pluck an oleander, then tossing it away.

Mrs. Budd struggled with the situation. She half turned to Longacre. Her eyes followed the fennel path. Again she opened her lips, with the odd effect of making her seemingly the author of Thair's dilatory drawl.

"I am an agitator," he announced at large, "a disturber of the existing state of affairs." His amused eyes lingered a moment on Julia's anticipatory stare, on Longacre's air of ready-for-anything. He addressed himself exclusively to Mrs. Budd. "Mrs. Essington has been wondering whether this was the morning you were going to show her — whatever it was about the Japanese chrysanthemum."

"Oh!" Mrs. Budd clapped her hand to her cheek. It was a gesture she had when suddenly remembering.

"That 's all I know — what she said." Thair was deliberate. "She was coming out, but I appointed myself ambassador."

"Oh, why, I — " Mrs. Budd began. The good lady was fairly cornered.

"Oh, then," she said, with a last hope, "I 'll leave you three young people here together."

"But," Thair protested, "I am curious myself to know what it is about the what 's-its-name chrysanthemum."

She was already in full retreat for the house — hair, skirts, sleeves all a-flutter. The look she gave him over her shoulder was despair; but he, imperturbable, dropped into her wake, tossing his dead cigarette into the oleanders.

The quality of the silence these two left behind them was of a different sort from the triangular uneasiness of the moment before. It was one with the life of the hot, green circle of garden. Something inarticulate, more simple than thought, seemed to pass between the two. The girl, still on her knees, but drawn erect, head lifted, eyes blank, looked, listening. Even thus, what height she had, what length of line! What strength in that flat white wrist, what vital color in her face, what daring in the back fling of the head! Longacre thought he had never seen her more splendid. Yet why was she grown suddenly little to him, helpless, and protectable? He looked down at the sun on her dark head. There rioted in him a reasonless desire to put his arms around it — to comfort her, to hold her! To hold her! Why, what was this? When had he ever —? Florence! The whole of the evening before came over him. That was all so sure and right! This? He was sick with himself. He was torn with a divided sense of reparation to Florence and, somehow, in some way, reparation here!

Some of the stress of it, in his face looking down, met her lifted eyes. She seemed to absorb, without comprehending, his trouble. She was only suddenly conscious and uncomfortable. She got to her feet without the help of his hand, laughing nervously, biting her lips.

"Oh, how — how stupid of me, Mr. Longacre — when I called you over to put my pups through their paces. We 'll do it now!"

She was eagerly rolling her handkerchief into a ball. She poised it for throwing, and looked about a trifle blankly.

"Why, where are they? They 're gone! Stars! Stripes! Here, boys!" She whistled. She frowned.

"Oh, no, no; never mind," Longacre began earnestly; "really, I 'd rather —"

She cut him short. "Then come and look at the oleanders. We 've all sorts. Mama loves them. They *are* lovely, but not sweet, you know. *I* don't love them." She led across the open lawn toward the thicket of blazing color that hedged it on the house side.

Longacre followed a pace behind, the word "sweet" repeating itself aimlessly in his head. He was vexed by the confusion of this ending to their perfect moment. He stood listlessly beside her, inattentive to her naming over the varieties, watching the quick turns, from side to side, of the long line of her throat.

If such were to be his feelings, better to be away!

In this position, with their backs to the garden, without seeing, they were seen by two turning the crook in the fennel walk, and thus quite innocently had the effect of checking the flow of extraordinarily amiable chat with which these two had, for the last five minutes, beguiled the time while waiting for Mrs. Budd and Thair.

Cissy stopped short, peering through the feathery green.

Florence knew that the other two there in the sun were the logical result of what she had sent Thair to accomplish, what through the night she had made out was due to Longacre — his chance to be sure of himself, to see just where he stood. *Did* he? *Had* he? If not, he must have more time. In giving him that, she would have done what she could. He must see it through his own eyes.

She could n't, with straight words, let him go. But she could help him to seeing; she could let him alone. She turned to go on, but Cissy had assured herself, through her peep-hole, of the identity of the person she sought.

"There 's dear Julia," she tinkled. "I have n't seen her this morning. I must — I really must speak to her!"

She made a preliminary movement toward an opening in the fennel, her skirts held high above her pretty, preposterous shoes.

"Oh, *would* you?"

Something in the tone made Cissy feel ridiculous. She hesitated, hating to meet the other woman's look. She raised her voice. "I 'm sure I don't see why not!"

Florence saw Longacre turn as Cissy flounced through the hedge; then she went quickly up the path without looking back. Her eyes took in the sudden flight of a linnet out of a cypress bough, the flickering shadows of the fennel blurring the walk, and the

"Her skirts held high above her pretty, preposterous shoes"

white glass-room door at the end. Her ears heard a hurrying tread behind her. She felt the urge of pursuit, a keen joy that he still would, though he should not!

Her whiteness flickered among the shadows as she fled; and he followed.

He caught her in the sun, at the door of the glass room.

"Oh, you!" he said, a little breathless, and laughing up at her from the steps below.

She looked at him silently, still of a mind for flight, her hand on the door. It opened suddenly inward, and presented them, face to face, with Holden, who stood, hands jammed into the bulging pockets of his old shooting-coat.

"You folks don't care much for your complexions, out there in the hot sun," he said. But he looked at Florence.

CHAPTER VII

THE HOUSE-PARTY IN THE STORM

THE breeze, which at noon had barely rustled the chrysanthemums, an hour later was tossing the pampas plumes across the lawn, and whipping the great sapphire of the sea into broken green and white. There was something ruffling to temper in the dry, beating breath. Hammocks were empty, the garden deserted. The hardiest of the house-party huddled on the veranda behind the Samoan blinds that snapped in the heavy wind. It was not the "trade" blowing in from sea — salt and dreamy with far going — but a land wind driving down through the mountains, stinging with sharp odors of dust and dry leaves — the very dregs of summer.

The sun went down through a wrack of broken clouds into a thundering ocean. To the party gathered around the hall hearth, and straggling up to the first turn of the stair, the garden appeared a writhing, twisting thing, crowded upon, and threatened by the raw, gray twilight. Bowed trees and lashing vines were the more piteous that there was no storm but the ceaseless wind streaming by, roaring across the roof, shaking the window-casings, beating the flowers flat.

The wild night offered to those about the fire the opportunity of drawing together; but the uneasiness, the inexplicable, mutual distrust of people aware of strong cross-currents under the surface of living, separated them. Their common isolation, even their common shelter, failed to unite them.

The curiosity, careless or eager, with which they had met one another on the first evening — the interest for inexperienced personalities — had been replaced by a sharp, personal thread in the web propinquity weaves. Each was no longer a watcher of, but an actor in, a drama, and each more or less dissatisfied with the part assigned him.

Their undermined sociability was apparent in wandering eyes, shifting groups, flurries of talk running into blind alleys. Who could have helped through the interminable evening, would not. Julia refused to sing. Thair read. Longacre intrenched himself with round-cheeked Bessie Lewis against the fear of being asked to play. He was bored with his predicament, and puzzled as to why Florence had chosen to sit with Cissy and Holden.

Florence, irresolute, wretchedly at odds with herself, hated the sight of this collection of people. She was glad to get away to her room. The great sound of the wind, surging by the windows, helped to lull her struggling motives; and waking in the night to a gush of roaring rain, she felt singularly at peace, consoled by the unhesitating strength of the storm.

But the dull face of the next morning was a depressing outlook. The gray sheet of the storm blotted out dunes and sea. The close damp of the first rains, imperfectly dispersed by too lately kindled fires, filled the rooms with its vague discomfort.

The house-party displayed the hectic amiability of people whose breeding does not permit them to betray their disgust at being, for a number of days, cooped up together between the same four walls.

The youngsters' ill-humor deplored the postponed hunting. The elders hopelessly cited instances of October rains that had cleared with the first sunset. Mrs. Budd apologized for the weather as she would have for an overdone entrée. Her guests responded in scattering chorus.

It was "jolly" — "a lark" — "just the thing for a quiet day!" — a round of deprecation that failed to leave them otherwise than chilly and damp. It was not an atmosphere that clung to them, but rather one they exhaled — one that existed in the face of the most flourishing of fires, that clouded the most amiable game of billiards, that sharpened the most friendly exchange of opinion. The out-of-doors that had offered such excellent opportunities for escaping themselves, or one another, was denied them. They were forced to face conditions that two days had created — conditions of which all understood too much to be unconcerned; of which no one knew the whole. Even Florence, who perhaps understood most, was bewildered completely on one point. But that was not Longacre's place in the web. *His* figure to her was clear in the foreground. His bewilderment in her sudden change; his endeavor to bridge this distance she had so suddenly forced between them, to win back what had been given and then so tacitly, so inexplicably withdrawn, made her suffer. That first day was little less than a battle between their two wills.

At what effort she maintained toward him the kindness of her smile, the quiescence of her feeling, the resolution not to avoid him, she did not realize herself. It impressed her that he sought her out more than usual. Formerly they had avoided marked association in a crowd. Now, was he avoiding some one else? Irritable, moody, he seemed most at ease with her, yet, otherwise than his wont, had little to say; and his eyes were more often away from her, following another's coming and going.

That tall Julia carried the shadow of the storm in her face. She looked cloudy. She was pale. Then, feeling a certain pair of eyes upon her, out flashed the color like a suddenly blossomed flower. All at once she seemed to mean something more than youth and beauty. She was less intent upon herself, more sensitive to who came and went; and sometimes her glance was backward — across her shoulder, as if aware of one behind her. Whose those fancied footsteps were, Florence had no doubt. But this was the knot she could not unravel: just what did Longacre mean to Julia? How much could she be to him?

A consciousness in her bearing toward him made it never twice the same — now imperious, now timid; now making advances, now repelling; but indifferent never. More often Florence thought she looked bewildered, as though something infallible had failed her. And though at times she filled the room with her rich voice — speaking, laughing, singing — at times she stilled and drew away from the others, and bent her black brows on the storm outside in a passionate brooding, as if, by her very desire for release, she would escape the confining house, and pierce the clouds, and find the sun.

To Florence the house was nothing else than a shelter from herself. In its restrained atmosphere, hemmed in by the monotonous, dripping rain, it was easier to lose emotion, to keep a quiet pulse; easier also to perceive in what direction these people, forced into constant conjunction of contradictory motives, would turn circumstance. However strongly she herself desired to mold it, she felt that now she must leave it alone. Even the fact of Cissy Fitz Hugh's persistent hovering in Julia's vicinity, mischievous as it looked, might only serve to shape events the faster.

Undoubtedly Cissy meant mischief, and though in sticking herself so fast to Julia she was more adroit than Florence had thought possible, her lack of imagination limited her. She annoyed the girl like a buzzing insect. Julia tried to shake her off. But Cissy had intrenched herself in a cast-iron sweetness that no impatience could ruffle, no rebuff shatter.

She had a very sharp eye on her cousin Thair. She suspected him. She could n't get at him. That illuminating talk of theirs over the breakfast-table had given her a clue. Longacre did have a fancy for Florence Essington! Cissy imagined every man had a fancy for herself until it was proved otherwise. Well, now it was proved otherwise; but as long as a man was within reach she felt him securable. But Thair had suggested Julia. This was troublesome! Julia was a beauty. Julia must be kept off, dragged off, until she could finally be scared away.

It was only while strolling in the conservatory with her arm around Julia's waist, or playing Julia's accompaniments — an office Longacre uneasily avoided — that Cissy felt at all safe. She was dropping hints all round the margin of what she wanted to say. But Julia was too absorbed in new, mysterious emotions to regard her manœuvers. She simply did n't see them. Her abstraction was exasperating to Cissy, who was afraid to go too far. She had once seen Julia angry. She realized that the right hint, properly dropped, would comfortably bridge her difficulty. But having it, how to get neatly across? That was the point. As usual, she fell in with a splash.

Toward the end of the second afternoon of storm, with the rain clattering on the west front of the glass room, she followed in Julia's wake up and down among the fragile ferns. The girl's eyes were earnestly on the flowers, but Cissy's were everywhere — toward the window, as if expecting to see some one in the garden; prying through the curtain chinks; then, with a quick peer of curiosity, following a shadow that through the half-open door she saw crossing the library floor. Then the piano answered to compelling fingers.

It had sounded much through the past

two days, but now it spoke. Julia lifted her head as if it had spoken to her. She did not look over her shoulder, but frowned out into the rain, and presently went on trimming her plants. Cissy, peeping between the spikes of a dwarf palm saw through the glass the outline of a man seated, of a woman standing, her hand poised at the music-sheet on the rack. Presently she began singing, but singing with a half-voice, as if she listened, following him like an accompaniment. There was something accustomed, attuned, in their relative positions, as if they had fallen into them naturally through long habit. The significance of this touched even Cissy's thick sensibility, but only as being the very thing she wanted.

"How absorbed those people are!" she observed, with a casual nod toward the glass doors behind her.

Julia gave a glance that seemed not to have noticed them before.

"Mrs. Essington plays very well herself," she threw out carelessly.

"Oh, *no!*" Cissy assured her. "Only a *very* little. But she 's so *awfully* interested in his work — *such* an inspiration to him in *every* way!"

"Yes?" Julia snipped off the head of a cyclamen.

Cissy was angry at what seemed to her obtuseness.

"The only wonder is," she said a little acidly, "considering what she is to him, that he does n't marry her!"

Julia raised her head from the asparagus-fern and gave Cissy a straight look.

"What are you talking about?" she flashed. Her blush was to the roots of her hair.

Cissy gave a little scream of mingled surprise and horror. "What *can* you think I mean!" She reached her arm around Julia. "Of course it 's a perfectly straight affair. He 's simply waiting for her answer."

She felt the girl fairly quiver under her touch. She took one step too far.

"Of course she 's years older than he, but he 's just the sort of a man to like that."

Julia removed Cissy's arm from her waist much as she might have plucked off a spider, gathered up her little watering-pot and shears, and left the conservatory without a word. She crossed the library without glancing at the two by the piano.

Cissy looked rather stunned. She looked curiously at the arm Julia had discarded.

"Upon my word," she thought, "one would suppose I was dirty!"

She settled her combs in her sleek hair, and presently took the course Julia had followed. She did not join Florence and Longacre, because the more she saw of Florence the more she was afraid of her. Besides, she felt a childish excitement in her cheap little rôle of intrigante. And there was another person upon whom she could practise it without fear: Mrs. Budd, more unsuspicious than her daughter, and as credulous.

Poor woman! Her outspoken, objective nature had been sorely tried by these days with so little doing on the surface of things, and so much on the under side. Her mind was a blur of conjecture over what Thair was going to do. Longacre was a disturbing element she had not named. It was Cissy who clapped on the appellation. It was Cissy who helped her to a conclusion.

It all came out so casually, on the side, with the things they discussed over their lace-making in the wide-windowed upper living-room.

Then it was Longacre (according to Cissy) who had kept Thair — extremely sensitive — at a distance: Longacre, charming, a dear — but, well — fond of being about married women. Cissy had had *her* little experience with him, and of course (magnanimously) there must be others.

"But if you *knew* this about him — and let me take *such* a man into my house — when I have a young girl!"

But, oh, Cissy was horrified. No! not such an attitude to Julia! Never! The point was, Did Mrs. Budd want Julia to *marry* such a man?

"Marry *Julia!*" This was appalling.

Cissy felt much satisfaction. Her intention was far from cruel. She merely wanted something very much, and was trying to get it. Gaging their feelings by her own, it never occurred to her that she had more than vexed and annoyed her hostess and her hostess's daughter. And this she preferred to being vexed and annoyed herself.

But the circumstances, upon which she had laid such bold hands, burst from her grasp and rushed past her. Yet Cissy was not aware of their progress. It was Florence Essington who first felt their precipitation. She foreboded a crisis.

With the waning afternoon the veil of the rain lifted and showed the long hook of the coast edged with leaping breakers, and a hurly-burly of high clouds tearing across the sky. The sun went down with streamers of yellow through the breaking storm. But the voice of the ocean grew louder with the wilder wind, until by fall of night its pulse was in the very timbers of the house. Its tumult assailed the very doors.

The house-party met over the tea-cups with such a sense of excitement as they might have felt aboard ship in a gale, an exhilaration that, by its feverishness, was the reaction from the depression of their immurement.

It was the last of the rain, Holden predicted; and the expectation of release dashed them all into high spirits.

Julia was gorgeous. If she had not been so beautiful she might have seemed overdone. She was alluring; she laughed and murmured to Thair until he was overwhelmed by the beauty of it. If he looked at her with all the admiration he gave to Gainsborough's lovely, pictured ladies — and coveted her to frame and hang in his gallery — there was no reason Mrs. Budd should not imagine he coveted her to decorate the foot of his table. The memory of Cissy's uncomfortable suggestions were confused with what seemed the near consummation of her hopes; but for the first time in forty-eight hours she beamed.

Longacre was talking pointedly and exclusively to Florence. Cissy once or twice tried to throw in a word. She got a glance, an assent without the obstinate head turning in her direction. It was stupendous rudeness, but he was oblivious to everything but his need of Florence. He wanted her responsiveness, her sympathy, to help him escape his tormenting self. He talked rapidly. He seemed eager. He was angry that her coldness left him keenly aware of the palpitating presence of the girl who flashed her dark eyes so hotly around the room.

But Florence read in his eagerness its double element. Her throat ached with the fullness of tears.

Weeks, months ago, when she had first felt the subtle change in him, so slight that she had resolutely called it fancy, that terrible possibility of another woman had given her some sleepless nights; but she had hoped, as her knowledge grew, that it was a negative fate — one of the slow changes time brings about in mind and body — that was drawing the man she loved away from her. She had made herself ready to meet such a fatality, but the calamity that came was unexpected. It had her by surprise; and at the outset she had failed of everything she had determined on.

She was not a jealous woman, but she had not realized how it would seem to have him love another woman.

And what was this woman? Beautiful overwhelmingly, unquestionably to be reckoned with, but ignorant — a child! What was she going to be? What could she be to him? A spur or a clog? Florence knew the man too well to suppose he would shake off the latter. He would endure, and grow less. It seemed bitter to her, then, that he was a man who could be made or marred by a woman, and she not that woman.

"What is the matter?" she heard him saying. The face he turned to her showed his irritation. Would n't he yet face it — that he loved the girl? It was proof to Florence of what power she had with him.

"Do you know," he went on in a murmur so inarticulate that only her ears, that knew his voice as they knew her own, could catch it, "we 've been miserable every moment since we 've been in this place. Let 's get out! For heaven's sake, come up to town to-morrow, and we 'll be married, and get away to the other side of the earth!"

She had a hysterical desire to laugh.

"Oh, Tony, you 're the only man in the world who could say a thing like that, in a situation like this."

He grumbled, "Why not? I mean it."

She knew he meant it. She suffered in the temptation to say yes, to end everything like that, to take what consequences followed when he should some day know, and hate her for it. She looked at Julia. Not alone the beauty of her, but some suggestion in its generous richness of a like nature, made the rest of them seem cheap. Florence felt faded as she looked. What a woman for a man to lose!

Longacre's eyes followed the direction Florence's had taken. He made an impatient movement.

If he stayed a few days longer under the girl's spell, he would find out himself how hard matters were with him. But before that happened he must be free of *her*. It came to Florence all at once that this man would not free himself. What a loyalty to lose! And to put it away with her own hands!

"Florence!" he persisted. She meant to say that she had something to tell him later that would answer his question, but her tongue tricked her into a gay evasion. She put him off. Because she saw the end must come, soon or late, she put it off. She would tell him to-morrow.

CHAPTER VIII

LONGACRE TRAPS HIMSELF

"TO-MORROW'S" sun rose on a miraculous world that dripped and steamed, and breathed a thousand sweet scents into a cloudless sky. The coast road, white for five months with flying dust, was black, with flashing pools of water among the trees. Their leaves, so long powdered pale with summer, were glistening green, shaking in the wind that was subsiding slowly. The breakers still bellowed up the little beaches and battered the rocky promontories; but they were sapphire-blue till their crests curled over,—no longer tattered by the wind, but breaking, far as eye could follow around the coast, in long white semicircles of foam.

"Miramar" was flung wide to this morning of "latter spring," and the multitudinous sharp odors of the garden poured through open doors and windows. The house was unpeopled. All were abroad in the garden, strolling down the spongy paths, shaking cataracts of drops from dahlia and chrysanthemum in their passing; whistling up the dogs across the terraces; calling to one another — scattering and rallying.

Theirs was a high, animal pulse — such relish and excitement of living as a runner has who pulls himself together for a leap. Those purposes and emotions that had had their growth in the thick atmosphere of the storm were quickened, pressing against circumstance, ready to burst out. They boded a crisis.

Julia Budd's face alone was assurance of happenings as she came across the lawn with her long, free step, her skirts picked high, her dachshunds in leash. Eyes lowering, mouth smiling, she looked neither at Bessie Lewis on her right, nor Thair on her left, but talked rapidly, apparently for any ears that cared to listen. Now she quickened her pace, took the path border in a leap, and had a hand on Holden's arm.

"Mr. Thair says it 's too heavy going for the hunt!" She threw it out, less a plea than a flat statement.

"Good heavens, young woman!" Holden's eye ran over the dripping terraces. "They won't have the dogs out to-day!"

"M'm," she nodded emphatically. "I rang up the club before breakfast, and the M. F. H. says, 'Yes.'"

Holden grunted. "They 'll mire in a minute."

She thrust out her shoe, damp but unmuddied, with a laugh. She called out his broadest smile.

"It 's another thing down there." He indicated the "sea meadows" with a back motion of the head. "If we fellows break our necks it does n't matter; but you ladies — wait till next week!"

"I can't wait!"

"It may dry off enough by afternoon," Holden said, admiring her spirit.

"Will you go with me, then?" Her foot drummed the ground. As he hesitated, she flashed round at Thair.

"Will you?"

"My dear young madam —" he protested.

"I 'll go!" said Longacre, across the group.

It looked so obviously a gallantry to rescue a lost cause! For an instant it seemed she hated him. Then she laughed.

"Why, I 'm not afraid to go alone!"

"Nor I," said Longacre. "That 's not why I asked you to let me come."

Julia looked at him in confusion. This

sudden sally out of his aloofness touched her, and left her at a loss.

Florence Essington bowed her face to the yellow mass of chrysanthemums — held it there a moment. When she looked up, Longacre was kneeling to unfasten the dachshunds' leash, the girl standing straight, with quick-rising bosom, but a composed face averted from him, looking down the terraces.

As the unleashed dogs capered up around her, she began tossing twigs and pebbles down the slope, the dogs scuttling back and forth in an ecstasy of barking.

Longacre saw the deepening color of her cheek. As they stood, hers was not so far from his own. The look with which she had answered his proffer of escort — the look so out of proportion to the moment, so given in spite of herself — had stirred in him something equally ill-governed and inconsequent; had called out in him something at once more natural, and more spiritual, than he had imagined the existence of; something more powerful than he had ever expected to reckon with. This, then, was the intangible thing he had been dodging. How easily he was slipping into this dazzling emotion! The past seemed dropping away from him; the future was nebulous. He brought himself up short, angry that a man might so lightly become a cad. He had never liked the way this girl affected him. What place had this overpowering alien thing in his life, he wondered savagely. Yet he looked at Julia.

Silent as she was, helpless, and not a little awkward, her very nearness elated him. When she turned to go he felt deserted. He snatched at any excuse to keep beside her.

"May I walk to the house with you?" He knew that had been the wrong thing to say.

"Of course," she answered. Her lips

trembled around the words. She had forgotten Cissy's communication. Strange that a fact could be so unstable in the face of a personality! But in that moment her world was a short, green walk between fennel borders to a glass door.

They drank in the overwhelming sweet of heliotrope. He walked stiffly beside her, looking straight before. She looked sidelong at him, and wondered what he thought of her. If he did n't like it, why had he asked to walk with her? The gap in the hedge, the oleanders flaming beyond, brought back to her that morning she had called him across the grass. She wondered at herself. She could never have done it if she had known he was going to be so dreadful. Had she betrayed herself to this equivocal mystery? No, he was n't like any one else. She had always known it; and she was shocked at herself that just the look of him, when he was so disagreeable, should make her so happy. She wanted to keep him with her, and the glass door took on the aspect of inexorable fate. The gap in the hedge was the only loop-hole. She turned toward it with the fine assurance that carried her over her doubts.

He stopped, blank at this unexpected manœuver. Did she want to get rid of him? He had believed that he wished himself out of it, but the thought of going away was unendurable.

Standing among the dancing greens, she looked back at him. The wind blew her clear pink skirts fluttering toward him. Her gentle "Are n't you coming?" saved him; but the sort of smile she gave, threatened — seemed diabolic. But she had seen, in his moment of unhappy hesitation, that he feared to lose her; and her spirits leaped, her eyes lighted, her mouth flowered in that sudden bewildering smile. Down on the slopes of the hot, wet lawns they heard the cicadas singing. The full green tops of trees moved on a melting sky. This riotous out-of-doors conspired with her against him. He felt, if she went on smiling like that, she would have him.

"For a moment I thought you were n't coming!" she called.

"I 'm not," he said.

The color fluttered into her face, but "Not coming?" she bravely mocked at him.

He stood resolute, but his hard, long look at her made her heart beat strongly.

"I thought you were going in," he said.

He expected to see her flare away from him through the oleanders, but, instead, she came toward him, dragging her steps like an unhappy child. That he should be the one to make her look like that! He was fierce with himself.

"You know I want to come!" he said angrily. "I 'd come anywhere with you!" He caught himself desperately. He had a feeling that he must save them. "But — but you said you were going in. I think we 'd better." He clutched for banalities. "Let 's have a game of billiards. Let 's ring up the club about the meet. Let 's — " he seized upon the next idea with relief — "I 've never heard you sing since that first night."

She looked up in bewilderment, fretted by the trivialities. "But you said you did n't like it — that I had no feeling!"

He winced, knowing this was just his reason. He had remembered how the emptiness of her lovely voice had seemed to estrange them. The sound of it in the dead boundary of walls might break the live enchantment of her presence.

"Oh, give me another chance!" He tried to take it lightly. But their consciousness read into his words multiple meanings. They came to the glass door in silence. He followed her through the glass room, where she plucked a tuberose whose sweet scent pursued him at once to vex and delight him. She seemed to gather more beauty by that perfume. In her ignorance she was reckless with her power. In her unconscious beguilement she was perilous to be near. He hoped she would sing badly — off key — anything to help him escape her.

She took a sheet of music, a modern arrangement of an old song. The first notes startled him. Did her pliant voice take color from the music, or had it found a tenderness of its own? It came at first uncertainly. The deep tones drew out tremulous, the high notes quivering with too keen intensity: but it lived; it interpreted; it was significant.

"Beautiful, beautiful!" some chord within him seemed repeating. The sweetness, the pure passion of that voice, singing up from him, away from him, in sublime ignorance of the birth of its being and the danger of its flight! He would not look at her; but in this new voice of hers for the first time he seemed to see the soul, more beautiful than her beauty — as desirable as life; and he had no right to think of her!

The chords went to pieces. His hands fell jangling upon the keys. He saw her, the half-sung note dying away between her parted lips — still parted in amazement. It made him desperate, that look of innocence that could n't help him!

"It 's such rot!" he said grimly at the music-sheet, and ran his hands in a thunder of discords down the keys. "You sang it well enough. If you understood it, I dare say you 'd do it badly."

Her mouth grieved. Her eyes flashed, resentful; she was bewildered by his rapid changes.

"First you say I sing without feeling, and then you tell me I should feel more and sing badly! I think you are hard to please."

"No; art is acting. I am complimenting

you on yours." He denied to her what was too plain to himself; but the tone of his voice, that intimate coldness, seemed to draw them forcibly nearer. "Now we 'll have something better," he said.

This thing must stop here, he determined. It should never happen again. But he must hear her voice just once again, her voice in his music. It would make her his for a moment.

He took up a piece of manuscript music.

"I don't know it," she protested sullenly.

"All the better," he said brusquely, and began the prelude.

He ran over the melody with phrases his fingers seemed to linger in and love — unexpected intervals, elusive rhythms — and gave her a look that said, "Come." She had to stoop to see the words. These, too, were strange to her:

"Never seek to tell thy love —
Love that never told can be!
For the gentle wind doth move
Silently, invisibly."

After all, it was too much. He dared not give himself up to it. He forced himself to technicalities.

He stopped her. "Listen to the time," he said, and played it over.

She sang it after him without the accompaniment, and faltered at an unaccustomed interval.

He played it again with the patience given a child's stupidity.

She sang, hating him with her every note:

"I told my love, I told my love,
I told her all my heart,
Trembling, pale, in ghastly fears —
Ah, she did depart!"

He broke off in the middle.

"Can't you keep with the accompaniment?"

She raged inwardly — flushing face, brilliant eyes.

"Is n't the accompaniment to keep with the singer?"

"No; with the song. And since you don't know that, listen to what I 'm doing. Hurry those eighths, and hold the 'G.' That phrase is 'pensieroso.' Don't sing it like a drinking-song."

"There is nothing to say so! How do you know?"

Her angry red mouth made him savage.

"*I* say so! It 's *mine!*"

She gasped, suddenly in a panic.

"I don't want to sing it! I don't know it! I — I don't like it!"

Her helpless confusion shook him to tenderness.

"Try this last verse with me," he pleadingly insisted.

She began, as though she could not help herself, in an uncertain voice:

"Soon after she was gone from me
A traveler came by
Silently, invisibly.
He took her with a sigh!"

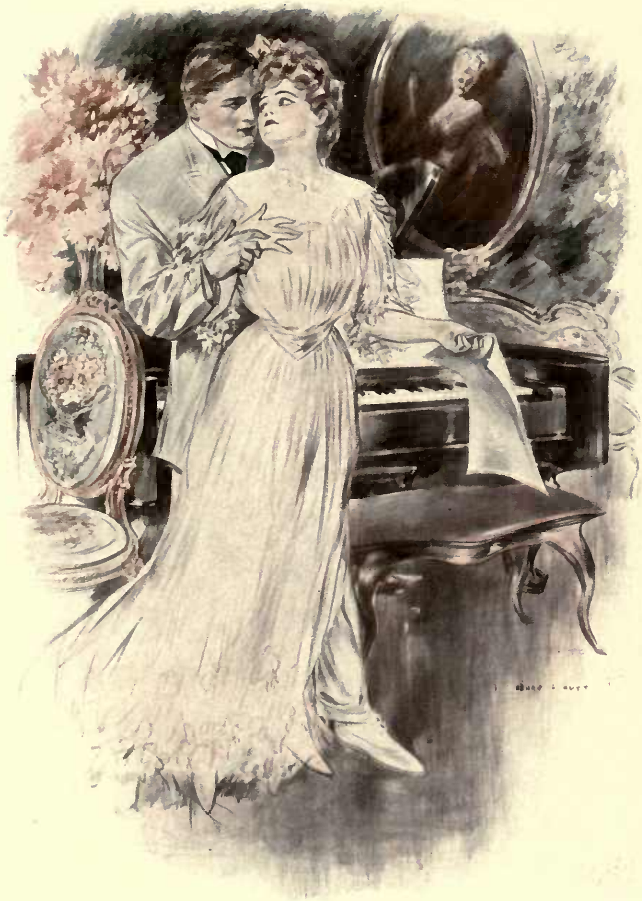
Her voice fluttered on the last word — forsook the note. He looked up to see her, large-eyed, pale, staring at him. The significance in the words had seized her. Had he told her flatly that she loved him, he could not have had her more by surprise.

"I — you —" she stammered. The blood rushed back to her face. The tears were too many for her eyes.

He sprang up. "For God's sake — *don't* cry!" He took her in his arms, and kissed her over-brimmed eyes as if she were a child. She might well have been, so pliant she was to his touch, so comforted with his lips on her eyes and forehead.

An instant before, antagonists; now their pulses had the throb of one. It was a miracle — wonderful! He kissed her on the mouth.

“‘*For God’s sake*—don’t *cry!*’”



Consciousness was in that kiss. For a moment it knit them closer together. Then she stiffened in his arms, thrust at him with a fury of strength. He let her go.

She drew back; she looked at him with a breathless expectation — then beseeching bewilderment. He looked at her, and remembered Florence. What had he done! Ever so slightly he hesitated. Ever so little his face changed. But she saw. Her look froze. All that she had heard — and forgotten — came back to her. Blind misunderstanding! Terrible humiliation! She covered her face with her hands. She could n't understand what he was saying; she was deaf — blind.

He tried to uncover her face.

"Let me go, let me go!" she implored. She escaped him. Her skirts swept his feet in going. The curtains whispered where her passage stirred them. A fragment of lace was in his fingers. The hollow wood of the piano seemed to hold the echo of the last note sung.

He stared at the floor, seeing her last look. How it had despised him! Worse — it had despised herself. The past hour had been but a succession of violent emotions and inconsequent actions. He had rushed along with them, without the ability to think; and here was the climax — the result! He had wounded the one whom, above all others, he wanted to protect. Why had his tongue hesitated with a scruple? It was too late then! Better have lied to Florence than let a false honor hold back the truth from the woman he loved.

Loved! He stared at this fact — recognized it, astounding, impossible as it seemed. This fiery girl had disenchanted him of every other thing but her own passionate presence.

He knew he had asked Florence to marry him; and yet he revolved desperately some way of making Julia believe that he loved her. He would pay any price for that.

Could he pay the price of playing false, of telling Florence that since he had asked her to marry him he had fallen in love with another woman? It was better than that Julia should remember him all her life with loathing. That was insupportable. But could his freedom, now, bring her back? That he could ever explain his hesitation was preposterous. He could not hope she would understand it. And not understanding, how could she forgive? Hopeless! How she must hate him! She could not hate him more than he hated himself.

He walked to the window. The wind puffed the thin curtains against his face. The whispering silk was like the soft rush of her from the room.

She was a child. She would not remember too long. A hard thought. Perhaps this whole inexplicable business was a madness of this latter spring, a thing of blood.

But now, here, it was a torment. The

thing was to get away — anywhere, instantly! But there was Florence.

He came back sullenly enough to that thought. He knew he must see her before he went. She had always stood to him for what was honorable and reasonable against what was impulse. Duty was the word above all others he hated, but he was bound to it now. He had never pictured Florence so palely as at this moment. She had been a fascination, an inspiration, a companion. She had been everything to him. There had been a moment, a transfiguration; and she was an obligation, a debt unpaid. She deserved a hundredfold more than he could give, and he almost hated her for it.

Yet — he reasoned resolutely, as he crossed the library — she, who had given so much, who had centered her life in his interests, had the greatest right to his honor and faith. And she *should* have them, he thought. But he must see her at once.

Through the open doors of the reception-hall he heard voices from somewhere out of sight over the dip of the terrace. The hall was empty of all but a slim, Spanish-eyed maid wiping down the wainscoting. She thought that Mrs. Essington was in her room. She carried up-stairs the card Longacre wrote upon. He waited, tossing over the accumulations of the morning's mail.

A dog came and sat in the open door, his tail beating the mat with expectation of attention. It was one of Julia's dachshunds. There flashed back to Longacre, with all the colors and odors keen as if actual, the picture of the girl standing tall and flushed on the dripping grass, tossing pebbles down the terrace.

He felt a sharp contraction of heart. That memory made what he was about to do unendurable.

Pinioned between his alternatives, his eye caught his own name on an envelop that carried a New York postmark. He took it up slowly. He read the letter-head. This was what he had been waiting for for months. This was to have made the turn in his life. Now a quite different thing had made it. The turn was a wrench. Everything, beside it, was insignificant.

He ripped open the letter with indifference. He read it with his brain still tortured with his quandary, and got no meaning from it, only an impression that it was not what he had expected. He re-read the cautious sentences, this time with attention.

There had been some lack of authority for the final decision in the last communication from the Metropolitan Opera Syndicate. On account of — he got through the list of reasons to the closing sentence — the Syndicate could not, after all, arrange to produce the "Harold."

He stood looking at the hand that held the envelop while the blood gathered in his face. A year of unsparing labor, a year of wire-pulling and waiting, thrown over because of a stronger pull!

He had nothing to offer but failure. Nothing to offer Florence.

That was the name he thought. But under the thought was the death of a wild, rebel hope.

He lifted his eyes to see Florence on the step above him.

CHAPTER IX

MRS. ESSINGTON SAYS "NO"

SHE wore a gown of sheer white, with a mantle of Spanish lace drawn close over her sloping shoulders and the flowing lines of her arms. Above it her large gray eyes looked out luminously.

"What is it?" she asked. Her face was full of queries. She divined her crisis already upon her.

Without a word he handed her the letter.

She read it through, dwelt on it a frowning space — looked at him while the frown smoothed itself.

His full under lip twitched with a suggestion half cruel, half sensitive. She saw he was suffering, but there was a confusion of feeling, something with which the letter had nothing to do.

"Let us go somewhere else," she said. Her glance had traveled toward the open door.

He followed her through the library, dreading lest she pause there; but she went on into the conservatory.

He closed the door, shutting them into the room of glass. In the midst of the transparent walls, searched by the sun, they were alone. The north end where the outer door opened, the south end looking on the lift of the hill lawn, were screened thick with heliotrope and passion-vine. The west fronted the skirts of the terrace, the somber, lonely oak-plantation, the distant sea. They saw through glass the out-of-doors, spacious, fresh, moved by the wind. Within, the air was motionless, too hot, too sweet, with scents of newly watered flowers.

She handed the letter back to him as though it were a mere nothing, saying simply, "Hawtry was against us from the first. He had more influence than we." She put it plural from habit.

"Hawtry was on the spot, not dawdling on the other side of the continent," he answered sullenly. The way he put it was brutal to her.

"*I* know the thing 's all right," he said half to himself; "but the rest of 'em have to know it, too! I 've got to make 'em! *That 's* my failure. Florence — as a force I 'm nothing. Lord! How I hate the public — and I 'm just one of the least of 'em! That 's it," he said. His chin was sunk on his breast.

"The public is slow to see and quick to change. What they think does n't matter with good work."

Her mind was busy beyond mere saying. She had never heard him talk in this strain before. She could remember when he had not known that his work was good; and he said "*I*," not "*we*." She saw that marked an end. More — he not only separated himself from her, but he divided that self: the musician — the man, and called the man a failure. The letter was not responsible for that.

"I 'd like to give *you* a better proof than this of what you 've done. For, Florence, you have done everything!" That was what he was saying.

She put up her hand, warning the words away. "I don't need proof of what you can do."

"*Don't* you?" he questioned, looking at her. "Have n't you begun lately to suspect I was n't worth what you 've given?"

"Tony!" her reproach was a cry. "You know — I could n't! But I have taken more than I have given!" An insane passion for confession was on her. But he was following his one idea.

"Then why have you avoided me so lately?" She had been expecting it.

"Have we ever been much together among people?"

He looked at her, baffled, but with something dogged and determined in his face. She had never seen such a look on it before. And she was going to refuse what he was about to ask. How broad his shoulders bulked on the glare of glass!

"Do you regret what you said at the dance, then?" he persisted.

"No!" She said it with such vehement impulse that he straightened, took a step toward her.

"But now you know what a failure I am—?"

"Oh, Tony—one failure is n't failure!"

"But," he gloomed at her, "it is if there 's never anything else!"

"There will be," she said steadily; "but *if* there never were, who was ever loved for his successes!"

"Florence," he said, "you are — you — oh, I don't deserve it!" He took her gently by the shoulders. "*Will* you marry me?"

The question was between them, but left each cold. She was a long time looking out through the begonia leaves before she answered —"No."

His hands dropped from her shoulders. She saw with a sort of shock how sure he had been of her! He could hardly take in what she meant.

"Do you remember what you said?" His voice, coming after a minute, sounded at a distance to her.

She could n't speak. She nodded.

"Then why — now — this?"

"Because —" her voice broke. She waited a minute, fighting for self-control; then went on more quietly —"because you don't love me, Tony."

She startled him. "Florence," he said earnestly, "you wrong us both. You know you 've always been the only one!"

"I only know," she said, "that you do not love me now—because you once did. Think! Am I what I was to you six months ago? Then think of marriage! A lifetime! You will be still a young man when I am an old woman. It was inevitable this should end."

"But why do you talk like this?" He had her by the shoulders again. "What has age to do with it? You knew that three nights ago as well as now. It 's an excuse! Don't you love me?"

Her voice was almost listless. "I love you so much that I 'm not afraid even of ending it."

"Florence, if you knew how I need you!" How he touched her vulnerable point! "If you knew how I have lost the only faith I had in myself!"

"You have *not!*" she made passionate denial. She freed herself, and stepped back from him; but he came on until he was close in front of her as she pressed back among the ferns. He looked bewildered — furious.

"You don't need me!" she denied him. "We have given all we can. It is different. I have nothing more for you." She put her hands behind her.

"Florence, Florence!" He spoke her name threateningly. "That is just talk! Why did n't you say at once you were tired of me!"

"I have told you the truth."

"Oh, the truth! Words! Good God, what woman ever talked reason to the man she loved!"

She gave a little, bitter shrug, as if his words had frozen her in the midst of the sun and flowers.

"*You* have nothing to regret!" he said, savage with self-pity. "There 's no blame — Lord, I don't *blame* you! But why did n't you tell me —" he stared at her, white with his dreadful realization — "why did n't you tell me before?"

Scarcely less pale, she looked back at him. What was it that had already happened? Had everything been done too late?

CHAPTER X

THE MAD RIDING

TO Florence everything — leaf, and wind, and the movement of her own blood — seemed to stop and harken to his steps going from her. To him the power and procession of incident were suddenly precipitated in a rending confusion, in which established custom was uprooted, faith cast down, self-confidence shaken to bits.

What went on around him had lost significance. He was among people, talking to people, looking at Florence across the table; but in this blind rage of suffering he was as indifferent to all external things as if he had been alone.

Neither Julia nor Bessie Lewis had appeared at luncheon. Julia had sent word that she would be late, to her mother's absent-minded distraction. Mrs. Budd's desire to rush away and fetch her fluttered before the faces of her guests like a flag of distress. In the end she was deflected by an imperative telephone that caught her just as her guests were rising. While they loitered between the dining-room and living-hall, chatting in groups, Julia, with Bessie Lewis at her heels, came down the stairs, habited, hatted, booted, drawing on her gloves, her riding-whip under her arm.

She was pale, but singularly vivid. Her dark eyes gleamed under her thick brows. Her red lips were tight and thin.

Florence, looking quickly at Longacre, hated the presence descending the stairs.

"Oh, I say, young madam," Thair protested, amused; "it won't do, you know. You 're going to break your neck."

"*You* are n't coming!" she laughed at him, though he was in his pinks. "But Mr. Holden is!"

"Here, here!" Holden protested, shaking his head, half serious. "Don't misquote me!"

"But we 're all going!" she cried, with a look straight at Longacre. "There are the horses!" She was buoyant. "Are two women going to ride cross-country alone?" she mocked them.

"By gad!" murmured Holden in stark admiration for such daring.

Julia turned on Longacre. "Are you ready?" she said.

He stared. Then — "Not for this," he answered briefly.

"Oh!" Her look again was diabolical. "Are *you* the man who was n't afraid this morning?"

"Did you accept the offer?"

"If I did n't —" her red lips curled over her teeth — "I do now!"

"You 'll break your neck!"

"My neck!" She began laughing, as if that were something superlatively ridiculous. There was a contagion of recklessness in the sound of it. She leaned a little nearer and shook her head at him.

"My neck is worth at least two fences! And yours?"

"Oh, not that much!" It was an answering spirit.

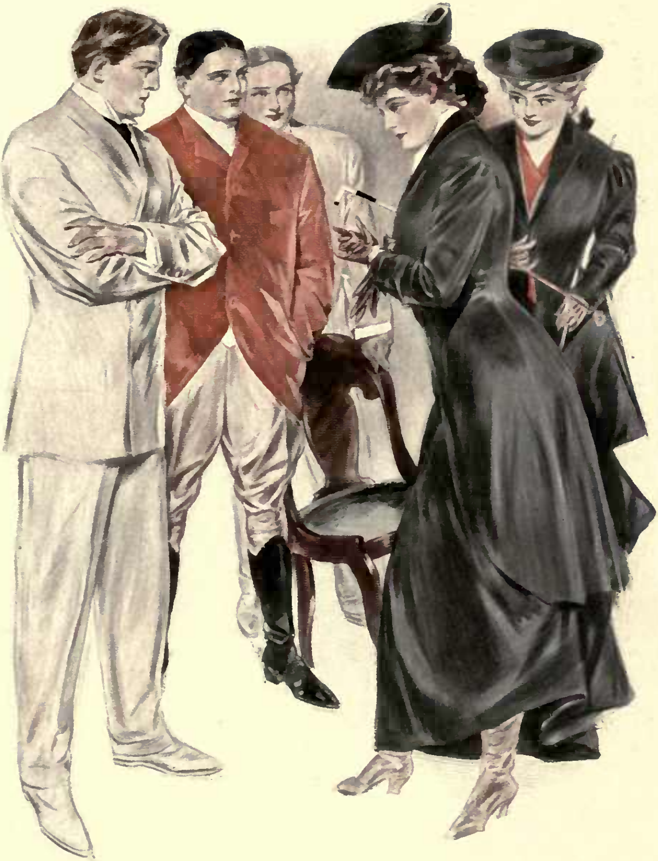
"Then come!" she cried. "We 'll lead them!"

A quick step hurrying from the dining-room, and Mrs. Budd's emphatic voice was lifted.

"Where *did* those horses come from?" The tone expressed mere general wonder to the aggregation in the hall, that quickened to personal apprehension at sight of her daughter equipped for the saddle.

"Why, *Julia!*" she began. Then seeing Bessie Lewis, she hesitated, dismayed.

“‘Are you ready?’”



"We 're just off, mama!" cried Julia. "I told James to have the cart ready to drive you over to the 'finish.'"

"Off? Over?" Mrs. Budd helplessly questioned.

"Why, the drag — the drag-hunt!" her daughter exclaimed. "You have n't forgotten our great event!"

"The drag-hunt! My dear child! Why, you 're *crazy!*" Mrs. Budd's hands were eloquent of horror. "Mr. Thair — Mr. Holden! Surely — why, it 's *impossible!*"

Thair repudiating all part in the proceeding, Holden struggling for neutral ground, Mrs. Budd adjuring them to a firm stand with her against this harebrained escapade, a confusion of voices began. Bessie Lewis wavered in the face of her hostess's vehemence. In the midst of the indecision Julia, who had been standing, her teeth on her under lip, her crop slashing at her boots, suddenly recommanded the situation.

"Well, I 'm off!" she cried. "See you again at the 'kill!'"

She caught up her riding-skirt, and ran across the hall and down the step. Longacre was after her. He felt a horrid responsibility for this mad bravado.

Her foot hardly pressed his hand as she sprang into the saddle.

Mrs. Budd clasped Thair's arm.

"Bring her back! Oh, *bring* her back!" she entreated.

"Safe and sound — no danger," he reassured her.

"Pretty rapid for the start," he smiled to Holden, as he tucked up Bessie Lewis on an excited mare. "Can you hit the pace?"

"I 'm with you," Holden muttered, straddling a dancing bay. "Can't let 'em go alone!"

They galloped in the wake of the mad riders. Julia's habit fluttered at the front. The reckless spirit of her rose with the swinging pace. Just through the gate she wheeled left into a wagon-track over fields, a short-cut to the meet; Longacre followed, a neck behind. The rest, going at a more discreet pace, stuck to the sea road, so that the two reached the meet some few moments ahead, and waited, without a word to each other, with the few pink coats, among a yelping pack in a meadow ruffled over by the wind, ringed by live-oaks and somber cypresses. The others came pounding in, breaking through the trees in a rush of voices and color.

"Too far ahead of the procession!" cried Holden.

"You can follow as fast as you please," called Julia.

"Oh, we follow, princess, we follow!" drawled Thair; "but don't make the way too steep."

The pink coats gave curious glances at Longacre's bare head and golf attire.

The uncoupled hounds scattered over the field, nuzzling through the wet, brown grass, till, with a short yelp from one throat and a long howl from thirty, they had the scent and were off. The field was bunched at the start, Longacre well up with Julia, who was riding hard for the lead.

The going was heavy, and for this the bars were down, but the girl rode straight at the fence. Her black mare sank over fetlock on the other side, but was away with a bare instant lost, a nose behind Longacre, who, with the rest, had taken the open gate.

" If you do that again," he shouted, " I 'll lead you ! "

She laughed and spurred away from him.

The M. F. H., with a dismayed look at her, was protesting to Thair, who shrugged. There was no help for it, he seemed to say.

The girl's hat, crammed over her eyes, pressed the hair to a close sweep low above her brows. Her nostrils dilated, her color burned. The riders strung out, Holden drawing abreast Julia, Longacre dropping back a length to Thair's pace.

"Easier going presently, I trust," the latter said, as his horse sank an off leg. "Look at the dogs," he added, as the pack darted away in a course almost at right angles to their first. "We 'll have a run for our money!"

"Stiff going?" said Longacre, watching the black mare drawing up on the M. F. H.

"Ground gets better; fences, ditches, worse; the neck-breaking course of the country." Thair, craning forward, laughed at Julia. "The filly 's got the bit in her teeth. Cruel going — got to see it through somehow!"

He took the other side of a mire and edged away to the left, seeking the narrowest place in the nearing ditch. It looked easy, a tiny gully swollen full by the rains. But Longacre knew how the banks, under-eaten by water, would not give firm footing to a dog.

Julia rode at it as if it were a crack in a rock. Holden, who was having his first experience cross country, slacked a little; but Longacre crowded forward, reckless of the boggy ground.

"Take it long — long!" he entreated. Her eyes flashed at him.

"Are you afraid?" she cried.

The horses rose together. His went over like a swallow. The black mare jumped short. One hind foot went down, but hands and voice and Kentucky blood lifted her out with hardly a struggle.

Holden's bay had refused the leap. Another had floundered badly. Thair's pink coat was sailing along the lower field toward a break in the brush fence.

"Shall we lead him?" said Julia, pointing on with her whip.

"For God's sake, go carefully!" he entreated.

It seemed to delight her to torment him.

She pressed forward, looking back with a challenge. Her lips, parted in the ardor of excitement, showed a cruel white of teeth. The ground was precarious, but she rode headlong. It was courting destruction.

He kept her pace, not in response to her reckless spirit, but for fear of what might happen, with the desperate hope of averting disaster. They flew down the field toward the thunder of the sea, with the sun and the salt wind strong in their eyes; crashed through the hedge; scrambled down into a road, up the sandy bank on the other side, through the scrub-oaks with a rush, and at once the salt-meadows were before them, their skirts of cypress black on a purple sea. Over the ocean a white arm of fog extended stealthily. Its thin forefinger pointed landward. Already the first films were caught on ragged pine and crooked cypress, like flying shreds of veil.

" That 'll cut us short," said Thair, frowning seaward.

"It won't be in till night," said Julia, pricking her mare till the creature bounded.

"In an hour," Thair decided. "We won't make the cypress plantation."

She spurred forward. "We 'll finish by five," she called back. "We can ride through a hedge — we can ride through a mist."

"A ditch in a fog," muttered Thair. "Not me!"

"We can ride like the devil and get through!" decided the M. F. H. "The damned dogs are off the scent again!"

Below, among the tussocks of the first meadow, the pack were whimpering, mingling, starting off on a false scent — returning, fawning, leaping up on Julia riding to and fro among them. The exasperated whipper-in beat at them. The four other riders came stringing over the rise among the sand-hummocks.

"What 's up?"

"Oh, dear, have they lost the scent?"

They scattered down the dip among the dispersed and nosing pack.

"They have it!"

"No. Fake scent!"

"Why on earth is there such a long break?"— Bessie Lewis's treble.

"*I* did n't carry the drag!" cried Julia, furiously, fretted with the delay. "Loo, loo, loo!" She urged the dogs. "Good heavens! I could find it quicker myself!"

She could n't — or would n't — rein the black in to the group gathered in the lee of the dunes, but darted away with swoops and stops beyond the farthest-straying dog.

"Can't we call it off?" urged Holden, looking anxiously at the encroaching fog. It was spreading out, a thick sheet raveling at the edges.

"Not until we have to!" said Thair, well into his cross-country humor. "But don't let the young madam get too far ahead."

Then Longacre — who had never taken

his eyes from where Julia glimmered down the somber sward —"They have it! They 're off!" and was away after them.

He heard the rest hot-pace behind, but he had a moment's advantage, and, having saved his horse between ditch and fence, now drew away fresh as at the start. He had an open course — two miles of sandy turf — to catch her in. She had ridden down near the sea, and, following the pack, now zigzagged up hill. He, hugging the line of the dunes, cut off a corner, and so caught up with her. Hearing him coming, she spurred harder; but he drew up inch by inch, until, his roan abreast her black, they rushed into the face of the wind together.

Hounds in front and hunters behind were forgotten; between the cypresses crowding down from the hills, and the oblivion of fog beating in from sea, they sped, wild with the elation of flight, unmindful of beginning, oblivious of end.

Fog was already streaming among the fantastic trees of the Point of Pines, cutting them off in front; but Julia held an unswerving course until the damp breath blew on her hot cheeks, and moisture stood in pearls in her hair.

The point went back from the sea in a low ridge, running up into a straggling grove of cypress. Its backbone of round, tumbling stones was cruel footing for horses. The pack made nothing of it, slipping over like snakes. Julia was for following, but Longacre turned a sharp flank movement that had the black headed off, flying up the point for the trees, the pack yelping a parallel course on the left of the ridge.

Julia brought her whip down savagely on the black's flank as she passed him. Longacre took an in-breath as they swept under the trees. The sun through the fine, blowing mist made a dazzle for the eyes.

Over a ground broken and spotted with

black stumps the girl guided her horse with admirable skill, Longacre saving his neck by luck. Their pace perforce was slower, dodging the trees that sprang on them out of the mist like specters.

Then, with a hallo, a crashing rush, Thair broke through the scrub on their left. Old rider that he was, he knew the short cuts of every course. He shouted, and they swerved toward him.

"Where do you think you 're going?" he panted.

"After the hounds!" cried Julia.

"The wild juggernaut could n't finish this run!" he protested.

"Nonsense!" The girl wheeled her horse. "We 'll be out of the mist when we get away from the point."

"*That* you won't. It 's coming in from the land, too. It 'll be thick in five minutes, and we 'll snag, or break our precious necks on these dwarf-cypresses!"

"We 'll be out in half a minute!" Julia said, shook her reins, and was off.

"Keep Miss Lewis back!" Longacre shouted it over his shoulder.

He heard Thair take up the words and call them again to some dim horseman looming large in the mist.

Already the hounds were a faint cry far in front, the girl a gray wraith flitting among the trees. Now the cypresses had her! Now she flashed into a clearing! Longacre heard hoofs and faint voices behind him, but in that fog, that covered the earth and swallowed the sun, the rider a length ahead of him was the only living creature. Before them the slope slid away into white oblivion. It was madness — this blind flight. He felt himself gaining upon her. His hand was ready for the black's bit. The thicket opened out; the trees fell away right and left. A dark line swam up in front.

"What 's ahead?" he shouted.

"Fence!" She flung it back at him with a note of fear. The sound of that brought him abreast her. Stark and black, the rails sprang out at him. He saw a glittering mist where the other side should have been — heard voices shouting through the fog — shouting them to stop. He snatched for the mare's bit. She swerved — she sprang to the spur. He saw Julia's profile, white on white, flash past him. His ears were full of his own name — her voice calling his name — as the roan leaped upward.

To Thair and Holden, blundering down the field, seeing six feet in front of them, came a sound — the dull, unresonant drop of a body falling from a height — a cry, suddenly cut off. Involuntarily they halted. Thair peered into the obscurity. Holden halloed. The silence was dreadful. They edged cautiously forward, expecting a hail for direction. Then suddenly out of the fog the black mare plunged on them, empty saddle, flying rein.

"God!" said Holden.

"E-e-easy!" muttered Thair, leading forward cautiously.

Now the stark line of the fence rose up; now, almost abreast of it, they saw the roan on the far side, standing, head tossed; and near him, vague as ghosts, two figures, one kneeling by one prone in the long, wet grass.

CHAPTER XI

THE WHITE DARKNESS

FLORENCE watched the riders down the terrace with a curious sense of participation in the race.

The whole thing had gone with such reckless abandon! What had happened to set Julia, with her hot glitter, headlong on such an escapade, to drag Longacre so doggedly after her? Her presentiment recurred to Florence with a hopeless drop of courage — that, after all, it had been too late! In freeing him, then, had she simply thrust him from her over a precipice?

She saw from the veranda the pink coats crowding through the drive gate. She heard around her voices exclaiming, reassuring, complaining. The riders had left behind them confusion of a petty, biting quality. She felt her endurance at snapping-point. She wanted to get out to "Tres Pinos," to stand on the rocky point, above the tumult of the sea, and shout against the shouting breakers.

Instead she walked among oleanders and pampas plumes with a rigorous composure. The placid face of the garden, with its blended sweets and colors, was cloying; the passionless blue sky, defiant.

She had let him go! After that she had hoped at least for quiet — even the quiet of hopelessness. But here was only irritating unrest, a striving to understand what, after all, she had done. She had meant that release to be so much to him! She kept seeing Longacre as he had left her. She kept hearing him reproach her: "Why did n't you tell me before?" The whole thing was in that!

She paced the garden over, threaded its thickets, measured its lawns with her steps, distanced its farthest hedges — moving, moving, while shadows lengthened over the lawns, the light grew yellow, the sun struck aslant through the oaks. Her thoughts kept her eyes oblivious to the waning of the afternoon, to the increasing chill in the breeze, to the queer, damp breath that seemed to come from no quarter, but to exhale from the earth, the sky, the sea. She came back to keen consciousness of her surroundings with a high voice questing her among the trees.

"What are you doing, poked off here at the end of creation?" cried Cissy. "We 're going to drive over to the club to see the finish and have supper. It 's the most we can do after the way they rushed off and left us!" There was a pettish twitch to her tiny chin. "Emma is having a fit for fear something has happened to 'dear Julia,' though I should say she 's perfectly capable of taking care of herself. There 's not the least bit of danger."

"Danger?" Florence repeated uneasily.

"Why, the fog! Look!" Cissy indicated airily.

Florence saw a gray sea drifting up the bay, ocean above ocean, covering the far turn of the coast, and flowing, white as wool, among the low hills to the south.

"Of course there 's no danger they 'll run into it," Cissy was saying. "They 'll finish in less than an hour — so hurry."

Florence's first impulse was to refuse. Next she wondered why. She was too nervous to be still. She felt, all at once, it would be a great relief to see the riders come in safely. Could she wait till after midnight to be sure of — of what would quiet this senseless uneasiness? She was so sure that it was best to go, she could hardly credit her own refusal. It made Cissy stare. Her look was a mixture of incredulity and relief. It gave Florence a faint amusement in the midst of her abstraction.

With Cissy had returned the rasping confusion that had been with the rush of the riders, but it did not depart with her.

Standing solitary, among the laurustinus bushes, Florence felt the impetus of it about her. She watched the fog gathering in, inclosing land and sea in an ever-narrowing ring. She caught herself wondering if by chance one of the long fingers had caught the hunt in its hook. Suddenly her restlessness, her unease, was crystallized into a sharp anxiety. Was it also an expectation?

She heard the party for the club-house drive away with relief. Why had n't she gone with them? What was she waiting for?

A veil was drawn over the burning disk of the sun as he dipped near the ocean. She was chilled with the fine approach of the fog.

She walked slowly back toward the house, turning once, and once again, to look behind her at the vanishing line of coast. She shivered, covering her head with her black Spanish lace and drawing it close over the bosom of the white gown that she had forgotten to change.

She had forgotten time that day. As much had crowded into a few hours as might fill a life. Henceforth time would be too much with her.

Her foot was on the veranda step when she saw a pink coat turn in at the drive-gate. She strained her eyes. Charlie Thair — and without a hat. She had never before seen him, out of doors, without a hat. As he drew up the drive at a quick canter, she thought he had reined in a yet quicker pace. She stood, arrested in mid-motion, turning to him a face that was a question. He was the first to speak, hailing her while barely within distance, as if to make sure of the first word.

"Where is Mrs. Budd, Mrs. Essington?"

"She drove over to the country club with the others to see the finish. What —"

"Thank God! Are you the only one here?"

"Yes. What is it?"

"Did they take the victoria?"

"No; who is hurt?"

He only looked at her.

"Is it — is it —" she put her hand to her throat —"*Julia?*" she brought out desperately.

"No, *not* Julia." He looked at her very keenly, very kindly. He need not have spoken the name that followed. She knew before she heard.

She got her breath with a sobbing sound, pressing her hand to her side.

"Oh, not a bad fall,— not bad, Mrs. Essington!" Thair was beside her. She thought he steadied her. "Some of the youngsters lost their heads, got into the fog. He went after 'em — took a nasty fence. Stunned, possibly a broken bone — nothing for the hunting-field," he smiled to her. He kept her from going to pieces. But she looked through him. He saw he had not reassured her, and was glad she knew, in spite of him, how bad it might be.

" It was too far from the club-house to get him there," he said. " Must have a carriage and a doctor."

" Doctor ! " she repeated, catching at the word as something to help pull herself together. " Who is there ? "

He gave a name and number. She went in to the telephone, dazed, dreamy, not half taking in what had happened. All objects were confused, all thought stunned in her. She seemed to be floating. But the curt professional voice that answered her over the telephone woke her, spurring her faculties to activity. She was kept minutes when seconds were so precious. She could hardly hear him out.

She snatched a flask from the butler's pantry, a man's coat from the rack in the living-hall, dragged rugs and cushions from the divans. She was heaping them into the victoria when Thair came around from the stables. The overcoat covered her gown, but the lace was still over her head from which her face looked a sharp, silvery oval.

"The doctor can be here in half an hour," she said. "Can we take a short cut?"

"I 'll show the man; I 'm going to ride," Thair said, putting her in. He took her going as the thing most to be expected. She leaned from the carriage. The sharp motion arrested him like a detaining hand.

"Who was it he went after?"

Thair looked at her. For a moment he hesitated. Then, "Yes, it was *she*," he said. "Now then"— to the man — "*lively!*"

The carriage spun over the coast road. Its wheels flew, halos now of mud, now of water. The span were at their sharpest trot, but to Florence they seemed to crawl.

The fog was all around, over, eddying like smoke among the trees. Somewhere under its oblivion breakers were rolling in with sullen voices and heavy, crashing fall upon the sand.

She leaned forward, peering into the gray blur before. She was conscious only of interminable mist and one person it held away from her. She watched Thair's pink coat moving like a will-o'-the-wisp. Now it stopped. Thair shouted to the driver. The victoria turned, dipped under the trees, passed between two gate-posts. She saw long grass under the wheels. The carriage rocked over broken ground. The horses were at a canter. Through a second gate, with a lurch, one wheel thumping over the bars half drawn aside. They were in the fields, with the ocean's hoarse voice dwindled to a whisper that was "Hush!" while her heart, audible to her in the deep silence, drummed "Hurry, hurry, hurry!" Then above the melancholy sea she heard the sharp chopping of the pack. Cruel sound! It made her shiver. Then a hallo. Gray shapes moved in the fog like shadows on a sheet. One was close to the carriage, a woman crying. Then Holden's voice saying to Thair, "Quicker than we hoped"; then, beside the carriage, exclaiming, "Florence!"

Her name was on his lips for the first time. She did not hear it.

"Where is he?" she said.

"Wait here," Holden answered, and rode ahead.

The carriage stopped. She sprang out and ran forward a few steps — paused. She saw two men coming toward her, carrying something between them. Nearer, she saw it was a man. He hung dead weight, head fallen back, arms hanging, hands trailing in the long, wet grass. Behind, like a following dog, came a tall bare-headed girl. It seemed unreal, a play scene, till she saw the injured man's face, dead white, with a dark streak across the mouth that lengthened it out into a horrible smile.

"Over here," Florence said to the coachman. Her voice was lost in her throat, but he obeyed the beckoning hand. She was back in the carriage. The men were lifting up the burden her hands reached for.

"Easy with the shoulders!" Thair muttered. They laid it on the heaped-up cushions. Trembling as she was, she seemed to lift and move the inert body as easily as the men. She stooped and wiped away the stain that disfigured the poor face. And then it seemed the vacancy of it was the saddest look it could have worn.

"Can't we get back by a road? The cut 's so rough?" she appealed to Holden.

The somber eyes of the men consulted each other.

"Yes," Thair decided; "strike the country-club road over here. Longer, but—better."

Holden nodded to the whipper-in.

"We 'll go ahead and knock out some rails."

"You 'd better go back to the house with 'em," Thair called after him. "We 'll ride over and let 'em know at the club." He turned to Julia, who, through it all, had stood back, not moving or taking her eyes from the shape in the carriage.

"*You* ought to go in the victoria."

She turned her eyes quickly to Florence. She put her hands to her face. "No! No!" she cried with vehemence — it might have been horror.

Florence looked at her. Julia's habit was torn away at the waist, her hair falling on her shoulders. She looked stunned, stupid.

Florence turned to Thair. "*Can* she ride?"

"I can ride," Julia repeated dully. Thair was holding the black, but she made no motion to mount. She only stood watching the black bulk of the carriage laboring away across the broken field.

Four riders waited uncertain, whispering, looking after the carriage, looking at Thair, looking at Julia.

Bessie Lewis was mopping her cheeks with the wet ball of her handkerchief. She gave a hysterical gasp. "Oh, Julia, your habit!" She dabbed nervously at the skirt.

Julia roused, shrinking away from the touch, turning to Thair. He almost lifted her to the saddle. But once up, she seemed to wake, to stiffen. She let him take the rein and lead the black through the ragged opening left by the torn-away rails. The carriage had turned down the road under the overarching trees.

Thair watched her anxiously. He kept her rein. He turned, touching his horse lightly with the spur.

"If you can ride as far as the club —" he began.

She pulled herself together, alert, staring at him, at the whispering four.

The rein jerked out of Thair's hand. He half turned in his saddle, blank, dismayed, as she wheeled and rode furiously after the victoria.

CHAPTER XII

MRS. ESSINGTON SAYS "YES"

DARK had shut down in a weeping mist when the carts from the country club drove up the "Miramar" terrace. The doctor's dry, professional presence met Mrs. Budd's voluble anxiety on the threshold, and, in a measure, smoothed it.

Oh, it was all right — all right, he assured her; only, the place must be kept quiet. (He had a grudging eye for the people getting out of the carts.) The patient ought to be moved to the cottage hospital, but — He pursed out his lips. . . .

But Mrs. Budd would n't hear of such a thing! Since the poor young man was her guest, had been hurt — she saw it dramatically — in saving her daughter—

The doctor's hands waved it away.

"My dear madam, that 's not the point. I want this case under my eye."

"Oh! Is it as bad as *that?*"

His look was everywhere but at her.

"Not at all — the usual thing. These youngsters all do it, but — send these people away!"

It was hushed enough that night, the house, but full of whispers, conjectures, things told and asked.

"Why, what happened?"

Nobody knew exactly.

"But, afterward, you should have seen her face!"

"Oh, just queer — dreadful!"

"But she was that at the start!"

"Then, of all things, her riding after them!"

"Them!"

"Why, Mrs. Essington came for him."

"Mrs. *Essington!* Well!"

So much was out, and so flat, one did n't know·what might jump out next. Julia's indifference — a stunned quiescence under her mother's reproaches and the curious glances of the guests — her white face, her blank eyes, added the last touch. "Queer" was the word for it, and this "queerness" clung to them, held them irresolute, was almost too much for their sense of decency. It needed just a turn to start them off, and this Thair gave, cornering Cissy Fitz Hugh, who, in the midst of the indecision, preserved a settled air.

He wanted to know was she aware that an early train and an eight-o'clock breakfast required bags packed overnight?

Cissy was mildly surprised. "How *can* I leave Emma at such a time?"

"Has she asked you to stay?" Thair rather brutally threw at her.

"But she does n't have to *ask me!*"

" I should think not — since she 's already asked two people whom she seems to want,— Mrs. Essington for one — myself for another." He smiled diabolically.

Cissy gasped. " As an old friend, there are some things I might do for Emma — "

" My good Cicely, there 's only one thing you have n't done. Do *go*, like a decent woman ! "

" But the others ? " She was injured. " Are n't they going, too ? "

" Oh, I guess they are," he grinned, " if you mention it to 'em."

She was indignant, but her departure was by the morning train that swept the house of all its guests.

Holden left with the others, but instead of traveling townward went to the hotel. He had seen Florence first.

He would like, he said, to escort her if she could let him know what day she was going up to San Francisco. He was thinking of the promise she had made him, that morning, driving out to the links. Through all the perplexing appearances of the last three days he had held by that as something tangible.

She had forgotten it.

She did not know when she would be going; *could* not tell him. Her pallor, her heavy eyes, the look she had, while she talked, of listening for something — all were eloquent to plead for her. He did n't understand it, but he waited.

She was merely grateful to him that he let her alone. At the moment she was living so in another's life that she seemed to own no separate existence. She seemed to waver between living and dying. When the relapse that followed the fever dropped him lowest, she felt herself reaching out toward death. When the crisis, passing, drifted him back, she felt herself quickened. The most she had ever wished, then seemed granted her.

Not only while she was with him, but when she was away, alone, she felt herself drawn somehow closer to him than ever before. She had forgotten the other people. She had forgotten the separation. While he lay, with the returning tide of living yet so low in him that he could hardly lift his eyelids, she was happy.

From half-consciousness Longacre roused, on the fourth day, to a clearer sense of what was around him. While Florence was in the room his eyes followed her as if fearful, should he turn them away, she would vanish. Twice he tried to ask a question, but the whisper failed him. Her ear to his mouth could not catch it.

She fretted, wondering if she had grown deaf that she could not understand what he so much wanted to know!

He lay with the question shut in his half-closed eyes until the fifth morning, when his voice grew from a breath to a sound; and she heard, his lax fingers in her firm ones, her eyes dropped to meet his, lifted.

"Is she safe?"

It took Florence a moment, groping into what was past, to understand, to realize; and another moment, while she looked across the bed, through the window, into the open sky, to answer — "Yes."

With that he closed his eyes and turned away his head, as though there were nothing more in the world to ask. She rose and went to the window.

She seemed to see Julia's blank eyes — how they had leaped to life at sight of her! And then the girl's cry!

The sick man slept.

Florence wrestled with emotions, primitive, savage.

That he should ask, with his first breath, *that!* That with her assurance he should turn from her to sleep, without a look, a word, a memory!

Yet, she told herself, what wonder that the last, violent instant before unconsciousness should rise before him with his reawakening. Had the question any personal significance? Had not his eyes followed *her?* Did n't he now turn to her, away from all the rest? Had not the wild girl, with her piece of folly, closed the door on *that* incident? What could renew it?

It was a question, a cry, half hoping — but she knew it was a forlorn hope.

He reawakened early in the afternoon. His first stir brought her to him, still hot from her conflict with herself. He was stronger this time, more awake to living. He did not ask, but demanded.

"I must get out of here," he said.

Her amazement questioned him. He dwelt long on her face, seemed to pluck some significance from it.

"You know," he asked, "how it happened? How I — ?"

She nodded yes.

Again he stared at her long and steadily.

"Don't blame *her*," he said slowly. "It was not her fault. Mine — mine!"

"Never mind," she told him; "we can go to-morrow."

To hear him accuse himself for that other was more than she could bear. Again he seemed to divine her.

"You don't know, Florence, what happened that morning. I was — I am — " he seemed to contemplate himself — "something no woman could forgive! It left her in such a way — oh, wretched!" His head rolled on the pillow. His eyes drooped away from her.

Florence recalled how he had met her at the stair-foot with the letter in his hand and some greater trouble in his face. Then that angry insistence of his in the glass room had been simply reparation! He had known then that he loved the girl, and somehow known too late. And he had told Julia *that!* She saw with dreadful clearness. Did everything go back to the night when she had wanted and taken so ruthlessly what she desired? It was not Julia, but she, herself, who had led that leap in which he had fallen.

"I must get away," she heard him mutter.

In her own room she lay a long time, accustoming herself to the new face of the situation, struggling back from extremes of self-hate and self-love to a clearer vision. She must touch again what she had so hoped she had finished with. Something she had called fate had seemed to be thrusting him from that girl; but fate, as she looked, grew to wear too much her own aspect. Had she let conditions alone in the beginning — but she had fought them, curbed them in a measure to her will. She had made a catastrophe, and she must mend it. That was the reason of it. But under reason was a passionate desire that he should be happy. That covered everything.

His self-accusation recurred to her. "Something no woman could forgive." Could not that girl forgive him that he was loyal? But she was so young, so appallingly young! And oh, the dangerous, difficult task of playing another's game for him! Yet, could he have played it himself, had he had his strength, he would have made it a different matter. Now, all he could manage in his great bodily weakness was that one absorbing desire to get away. She knew how impossible it was to deflect him where once his obstinate mind was made up. She felt every moment, with his returning strength, her chance was slipping further from her. But she was baffled. Turn and twist as she could, she was shut fast in the middle of a deadlock.

The departure of all the amalgamating presences had left the estrangement of these few so closely concerned a naked fact. They felt its presence palpable among them. It filled the rooms of the house, sat between them at table, walked with them in the gardens. Julia, unreachable behind her hard indifference, through which her voice broke sometimes with sharp suggestions of collapse; Mrs. Budd, nervous, vacillating, strung to the verge of tears; she, herself, out of love with everything but the hope of one man's life; all were desperately at odds, no one trusting another.

Thair, alone, had given her the sense of an outsider. If he were in the midst of it as much as any one, it did n't touch him. The very perfection of his manner, meeting those anxious, studying looks Mrs. Budd threw at him, was assurance that he knew his uneasy place in her conjecture. To Florence he had been, with his unconcern, like fresh air in a close room. He perfectly understood; and he took it easily. Their tacit understanding was the only note of confidence in the unquiet house.

She knew he knew to a certain point just how she stood; but that point was the turn where she had let Longacre go. Just how far Thair missed this, she had read in his kind, congratulatory looks at her — his odd, half-protecting air of seeming to ease her off, as much as possible, from the strain, the reiterant conflict of mother and daughter, as from something quite beside her interest.

He had never had so much that air to her as now, this afternoon, when he encountered her stepping through the tall French window upon the veranda, and turned and lifted the passion-vines for her to pass under — such a pretty thing, she thought, for a man to do for a woman as old, as haggard, as self-absorbed as she. They went the length of the fennel walk together. She remembered the morning when Longacre had left Julia so impetuously to follow her as something that had happened a very long time ago — something into which Thair's voice dropped sharply, shattering the image.

"We are to be abandoned," he was saying. "The young madam is leaving us for town."

She stood, looking over the sun-drenched terraces. The thing had come on her so suddenly! She had lost her chance! She put her hand to her forehead. This would be the end! The thing would just fall to pieces by itself!

Then the lasting silence got her, and she looked at Thair. He was looking at her.

"What is the matter?" that look was saying. "Is n't it all right? Are n't you glad? Was n't it that that you wanted?"

Her reply was just her look of despair. "What *can* I do!" She might as well have said it out. It was so clear between them that his answering her with words seemed quite natural.

"Can *I* do anything?"

She looked away from him to that glittering spot where the sun struck the sea.

Why, there was only *one* thing any one could do, so elemental that it took this sharp necessity to make it possible. She saw now. It was, all along, the only thing she could have done.

She turned back to Thair, whose last question hung, waiting her answer.

"No, nothing — you 're good — not now — except let me go back alone!"

She ran. From the moment he had confounded her she had dropped all consideration of appearances. On the stair she passed a maid, her arms heaped with newly ironed linen and delicate flowered fabrics — frocks Julia had worn about the house. Then she must be packing. She would be in her room. Half-way down the upper hall, Florence heard the rushing approach of sweeping silk. She stopped, almost opposite her own door, and waited. Julia came down the hall, headlong even when walking. She saw Florence not until she was upon her. She started, drew herself together, made to go on, hesitated.

"Can I do anything?" she said. Her voice gave the commonplace sharp significance, as though her very self depended on the "anything" she could do.

"Yes," Florence said, holding open her door. "Come in."

The girl gazed, as if this were the last thing she had expected. Her eyes looked out blackly, defiance through suspicion, as the door closed after her. "See how miserable I am," they seemed to say, "but don't dare pity me!" Her face was startling, bewildering. It meant so much more than seemed in nature, even in a woman who had injured the man she loved. It had the furtive suffering of a creature in a trap. It seemed that at any moment her strained voice would break into a cry.

"You 're going to-morrow?" Florence asked her.

Julia stiffened. Her manner was perfunctory. "Yes, I 'm going up to town. If there is anything I can do for you there — "

"Are n't you needed here?" Florence asked her. She felt quieted by the other's agitation.

The girl stared as if she suspected she was made sport of. "I? Oh!" She smiled sharply.

"Are you sure there is nothing you could do by *staying?*" Florence persisted.

"I see what you mean," Julia replied, still in that whetted tone that served to defend her weakness. "My fault it happened! It 's done. How can I mend it? Oh, do you think any one regrets it more than I? I would do anything — *anything*," she repeated with sudden vehemence, "to change it, to — but it is impossible!" Her hands, that she had pressed together, fell apart. She turned nervously toward the window, as if the sight of the wide, warm garden could help her. But Florence moved to intercept the glance.

"If one had injured a person one loved — " she began. She stopped, startled at the application those words had for her own case.

"A person one loved!" Julia repeated. The words seemed dragged out of her throat. She turned on the other woman piercing eyes. "But, if — he did not love you? If he loved another woman?"

Florence pressed her hand to her side.

"And, loving her," the girl rushed on, "still gave you a — a pretense for truth — if you had hurt him mortally — oh, mortally — what would you do?"

Florence, white, breathing short, looked at the floor. It seemed rising up to strike her. She was overwhelmed that Julia had divined her case — had guessed,— a dozen frantic suppositions flew through her mind. Then the fact flashed on her: the girl had only cried her own tragedy! But how was it hers? How could it be Julia's, when Longacre had told her —? Florence filled her lungs with a deep, slow-drawn breath, as if she were drawing in courage to face what was rising in her mind. It was Longacre's face as it had peered up into hers that morning, and his voice restlessly repeating, "I am something no woman could forgive!" Her quickening comprehension embraced what that might be. Longacre had told Julia nothing! She put her hand out behind her, touched the table to steady herself. The passionate gratitude that rose in her at his forlorn loyalty stood still when she raised her eyes to Julia's face. She knew what the girl was suffering. It was what she herself suffered, but worse, for Julia was blind. Julia could see no way out of it, and Florence herself, for a moment, was nerveless before the enormousness of her own task.

Her voice came weakly. "I would be very sure, first, that he did *not* love me." The answer seemed her own as well as Julia's.

The girl's eyes blazed at her.

"Don't *you* know?" she said.

But Florence expected to be stabbed.

"Yes, I do," she answered steadily; "but you must see him yourself."

The girl's bosom lifted sharply. "Oh, *no!*" she breathed. She stood up. She seemed to tower over the other woman. She seemed to force it home to Florence how impossible it was to find a way out.

"Oh, if you knew," she cried, "you could n't ask it! Even *you* could n't wish me such — such humiliation."

"If I knew?" Florence repeated, dreading, shrinking from any further revelation.

"What happened," Julia moaned, turning away.

"Would what happened seem any less impossible," Florence slowly began, "if the man thought himself bound in honor to another woman — "

"*Thought!*" Julia cried.

"A woman whom he did not love," Florence kept on; "to whom he was tied by old promises, with whom now there was nothing but an old friendship?"

Julia looked at her a little wildly.

"I — don't know what you mean!"

"I mean this woman did not — was not in love with him any more. When she knew of — of you, she released him."

"But that was after — "

"What happened? Yes."

"Then he did n't keep faith with her — with either!" Julia cried, still fixing Florence with her white, quivering face.

"Because he loved you."

Julia seemed to stand there irrationally, convinced by the sound of Florence Essington's voice — by just the weight of its own deep, passionate conviction.

"Then why could n't he have told me?" the girl murmured forlornly. "I would have believed him! Why could n't he trust me!"

The last words caught a little bitter echo in the woman's heart. She silenced it. She took Julia by the shoulders, who had slid to the floor, half kneeling, half sitting, the tears slipping down her cheeks.

"Even if you love him," she cried, "is n't he human? Can't you forgive him that much? He will forgive you — men forgive more in women!"

Julia's hands held the folds of her gown. "But what can I do?" she implored. She hung on the other's words with a passionate dependence.

Florence, with an impulse, took the face between her hands.

"Be sure you want him more than anything else," she murmured.

The head inclined faintly. The wide eyes still held hers with their piteous stare and falling tears.

"Go to him," Florence whispered. She felt the girl trembling.

"When?"

"Now!"

Julia sobbed. "My mother!"

"That will come afterward. Never mind any of the rest of us — what we do and say. It does n't matter. Only think of him! Promise me you won't leave him until you have made it right!"

"Are you sure I can?" the girl whispered, with such a face of hope and fear, such joy struggling with tears, that Florence, remembering in what hard ways even the greatest love may lead, leaned down and kissed her.

"Quite sure," she said.

Julia drew yet closer. "Are you *sure* he — he loves me?" The last words were a breath.

Florence drew back coldly. "You must

go *now*," she said. Then seeing Julia shrink at her strange, dry voice, she added, "Do you think he would tell that to *me?*" — at what cost she herself did not measure.

But she did not realize that she was in the midst of her crisis. She was too much in it to look back or forward. She saw only outward actions, the minute present. When she spoke with the nurse at the door of the sick-room her voice was even matter-of-fact.

The white-capped woman came out. Florence waited until she went into another room farther down the hall. Then she almost pushed Julia in. "No one will come," she murmured as she closed the door after her.

CHAPTER XIII

THAIR CONGRATULATES

FLORENCE sat down in the window-seat in the dusky hall. The diamond panes of milky glass let in a misty light. She drew the drapery of the dark curtains around her, the better to insure against interruption. The house was silent at that long hour of the afternoon when all the day's processes seem to stand still, and heart and brain alike grow torpid. She waited, as still as her still surroundings, a piece with the dull curtain, until an opening door should reanimate her to living.

At the sound of an approaching step — was it an hour or a day she had kept her post?—she started nervously Through the slightly parted curtains she watched the stair-turn anxiously. That long, dangling, masculine figure was at least not Mrs. Budd. She sighed relief. It was Thair. He came on with his elegant slouch, turning down the hall toward the window embrasure, stopped a moment on the threshold of the morning-room, looking in with a questing turn of his long neck, strolled on, craning at the alcove curtains.

Florence thrust them back. Evidently it was not she he was looking for. He was surprised, and something more, hardly curious, but a look that harked back to what had been revealed him on the terrace.

"I am," he explained to her, "in search of the young madam." He added with a considerative smile, "Our last ride together—if *she* has anything to say about it."

Her face showed an odd mingling of distress and relief.

"But you will have to wait. She can't be disturbed now."

"Well"—he dawdled over it a minute—"but she *will* be disturbed. *I 'll* wait, of course; but will—Mrs. Budd?" He brought it out with the faintest embarrassment.

Florence looked at him, considering.

"It 's just what she never *will* do," he said. "She 'll expect to see us off."

Her answer was the dismayed sound that escaped her lips. She put her hand out with a gesture that warned him back. They were like a small secret conclave, shut in their alcove behind the curtains, stilled in the middle of their plots.

A door down the hall had softly closed. They saw Julia stand for a moment outside the door of Longacre's room. Then she turned and came slowly along the hall. She was coming down upon them, and with every step she overwhelmed them more. Such a strange Julia, so pale, so unimperious, with all her sparkle stilled! Yet she shone! Her great dilated eyes, her face, dawning on them, glimmering by, looked aghast with happiness.

Florence was trembling. Her eyes were on the narrow slit between the curtains where that vision of Julia had passed. She could not speak immediately when she finally turned to Thair. He was looking at her with the oddest possible expression.

"Well, it does n't matter about Mrs. Budd *now*," he said. His usually smooth voice sounded uneven. "She 's done for!"

At this the lines in her forehead grew deep. "If one could only make it easier for her! It is *dreadful!* But — did n't you see, just now?— it was the only thing to do!"

"Dear girl," he earnestly assured her, "that you think so is enough for me! But you can't show it to *her*, poor lady!"

She looked at him with a sudden flash. "*You* could make it easier."

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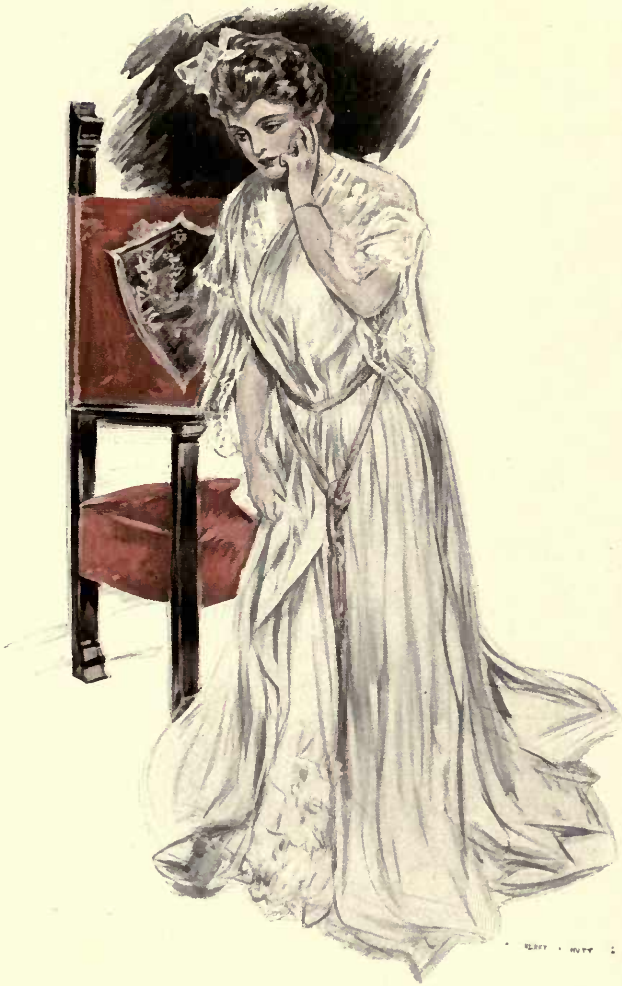
"Such a strange Julia!"



"I?" He was blank.

"If she thought — if she knew that some other hope she may have had for Julia — was — could n't you make her know?"

At this he fixed her with his old diabolical glint.

"You mean I could congratulate her — heartily?"

Her answering smile was wan. She left it to him.

He looked back at her once as he went down the stair.

She held herself still until he was out of hearing. Then, on tiptoe, she stole down the hall to the door, and hesitated with beating heart. There was nothing in the world she so dreaded, nothing she so much wanted, as to see Longacre, to hear his voice. She slipped into the room, expecting to find it somehow extraordinarily changed, revolutionized. There was a change. It was in the man who lay upon the bed.

He lay, eyes closed, face quiet. But, ah, asleep! The strong structure of the face came out startling in its emaciation. She looked at that face, dwelt upon it, saw in the salient lines something she had been seeking since she had known it. Dared she think this had come through her — the last thing she had given him! She waited to see those obstinate lids unclose.

She had come so lightly he had not heard her. She would not for the world have spoken, but if she looked at him — he *must* know she was looking at him!

Then, as he lay so still, not a muscle of the sensitive mouth moving, breathing lightly, regularly, it came upon her that he wished her to suppose him asleep.

A faint, cold breath ran in the nerves of her body. She turned her head quickly away, as though, through their closed lids, his waking eyes could spy on her.

She had thought, child-blind, not of friendship, not of recognition for what she had spent, but of just that last bitter-sweet confidence when he would tell her, show her without words, perhaps, how much this new happiness would be to him. And he hid it from her!

Well, he was right. How impossible anything else was! There were barriers of gratitude — yes, and higher yet than those — barriers she herself had reared between them!

She stood, hands limply dropped, head bent. She saw shadows of jessamine leaves moving like fine, gray fingers on the sunny floor.

She had no more right in that room than the veriest stranger.

CHAPTER XIV

THE QUEEN'S COURTESY

THE cart drew up at the station with a bounce. Before it had fairly stopped, a large man in the clothes of a working citizen, with the umbrella and bag of a traveler, sprang out and made a rush for the door of the ticket-office.

A lean, brown fellow in riding-trousers, who was dawdling on the platform, stared and laughed.

"Holden, what 's the rush?"

"Good Lord, have I missed it?" gasped the other.

"The train?" Thair yawned. "Twenty minutes early."

"They told me I 'd barely make it!" Holden stared resentfully at the vacant rails.

"H'm. Del Monte," Thair smiled. "Even the clocks are fast!" He squinted at the sky, soft sapphire-blue.

"Why go up to-day? Wait over, and I 'll show you a bit of a cross-country run."

"Thanks," grunted Holden; "I 've had my money's worth." The grunt ended in a grin.

Thair chuckled.

"Well," Holden demanded impatiently, "how is it over at the house?"

"We-e-ell,"—Thair drawled out the word interminably, while amused recollection crossed his face,—"the rains fell, and the winds blew! *I* stayed at the club through the worst of it. I was sorry for the women—the young madam and Mrs. Essington. They had to stick it out."

"You mean Mrs. Budd was so annoyed?" Holden was a little puzzled.

"Annoyed! Oh, Lord, that 's not the word! Cis says 'upset.' That 's nearer, only seventeen times more upset than usual! Poor woman, she feels that Julia owes the man some reparation for 'breaking his neck,' but marriage seems to her extreme."

"But what 's the objection? He seems a decent sort of chap."

"He is; the decentest of his sort; but it 's not the sort madam had hoped for Julia. Money, y' know, and — well, composers seem a bit out of the way to her. But the girl has too much blood to take —" he smiled quizzically — "what was the 'correct thing.'"

"I 've had an idea that this would come about from the first," said Holden, complacently.

"M'm?" Thair mused, interrogative.

"Mrs. Essington 's been immensely interested in those two young people. Should n't wonder —"

Thair bit off a smile. "Remarkable woman, Mrs. Essington," he observed.

"That damned train 's spending the night on the switch," growled Holden. He did n't look down the track, but over his shoulder at the "Miramar" runabout that had just come into sight around the turn of the drive.

The lady who sat so erect beside the groom was Florence Essington.

Holden looked relieved. Thair indulged in what might be called a mental whistle. He gave one sharp glance at Holden, whose attention was engrossed by the approaching vehicle; then a frank smile and a wave of the hand toward the lady — a salute she returned in kind. The approaching train hurried their greetings and farewells, but in that short time he got an impression of a more obvious sophistication, a more pronounced worldliness in her than he had recalled.

Her gown, black with dashes of white, suggested the last and finest flight of fashion;

her manner, the latest, most charming importation; her very movement, a consciousness of the keen eye of the world.

While he pondered whether these differences did not merely enhance the beauty of her shadowed eyes, her black and white glimmered through the door of the car. Holden waved his hand from the step and followed her.

Thair wandered down the platform toward where the groom held his uneasy mount.

"That 's a match," he muttered. "She 'll take him. That 's what she means. She 's wise. Great woman! If a man were fool enough — h'm, h'm!" He nodded to the groom.

Holden, having established his bags in a seat near the door, took the chair next Florence.

She was merry, full of twisted phrases, making him laugh in spite of his impatience.

"I believe," he told her, half in earnest, "it 's because you 've fetched that engagement you 're in such spirits."

"Oh, do you think me a match-maker?" she laughed.

"Well, I wish you 'd be one for yourself," he said bluntly.

Florence bit her lip. She was hating to face what she knew she finally must.

"Don't you remember," he went on, "a few days ago you said you would have something to tell me on our way back to town?"

A few days ago! Could it be possible! She looked out of the window. Past rushed a stream of black oaks pricked through with flashes of sea.

She knew what she would answer. She had turned it over for twenty-four hours. She had not dreamed how hard it would be to utter. His kindly eyes were bent upon her with a steady patience, but his blunt fingers drummed the arm of her chair.

"I tried then to make you see," she began, "that I was n't merely putting you off. I did n't know then just what I could say — how much I was fit for what you ask of me." She supported his look. "Now I am sure I am not."

He waved away her objection with his large, open hand. "Are *you* the judge of that?"

"Who else? Do you think I could take without giving? If I loved you it would be different."

"Yes. Well — I hardly hoped that, after what you said the other day," he answered sturdily; "but we are no longer children; I would not ask too much of you. You are a woman of wide interests, and my life takes me so much among people, manipulations of men as well as things, you might — "

She took it up. "Yes, if I could give your interests all my interest, all my energy, my thought, as I might have done once, as I would now, gladly, if I could. But I can't.

I have used up such power as I had. I 've done all I can do in other people's interests. Now my interests will be scattered. My ways are already fixed. You offer me an active life in the world, but I am through my activities."

"Good Heaven!" he broke out; "why, you talk as if you were old—*you*, with the best of your life before you!"

Her smile was tight. "Perhaps I have lived through things too quickly. But I know I like you too much to cheat you, which I should do if I married you. I can't—can't do it! Believe me, I would like to give you what you ask, but I have n't it."

"Is this the last word?" he said, half risen.

She nodded, her eyes full of tears.

He saw them, and touched her arm. "Don't, don't!" he said gently. "I suppose you know what is best for *you!*" The accent fell on the last word sadly. He rose; she saw him, a dim bulk on the light windowsquare as he stooped to gather up bags and umbrella; saw him passing her. The door closed behind him.

Florence, with a shiver, relaxed from her tension, leaning back in her chair a little weakly. Her eyes closed. All the glitter she had shown them on the platform had fallen away from her; and thus, with shut eyes, her unlighted face showed exhaustion so deep that peace seemed the next thing to it. The noise of the train swam heavily in her head. She had no thoughts, only — as now and again she opened her eyes — a vague noticing of small things; and then at sight of green onion-fields wheeling past the window, a sad stab of memory. She shut her eyes, lest some other sight remind her too cruelly of what was left behind. She did not sleep. She was unconscious of time in her deep, complete lethargy of soul and brain. When she opened her eyes again the lights were swinging down the middle of the car, and through the windows she looked out over water, beautiful violet-blue in a softly gathering dark. The train was puffing slower, and now a glimmering succession of windows shut out the water.

The dark tunnel of the ferry-house encompassed her, but the memory of the purple flash of sea lingered with a vivid pleasure — more vivid that the glimpse had been so short — as she followed the rush out of the car door. The cool, soft wind on her face, the crowd tearing to and fro, roused her. The "overland" was just pulling out; a string of electric lights, white jackets jumping to the platforms, faces peering from the windows, it passed her. She felt a queer throb, a wish to be going with it somewhere, outward bound. What had she to hold her anywhere? But even with the thought the sense of poignant personal loss would not rise up before her. Her lethargy was lost, but her consciousness, no longer concentrated upon herself, was relaxed to a keener perception of her surroundings — of the high, dusky-vaulted ferry-house, echoing full of voices and footsteps; of the fitful play of light on the foam churning through the tall piles of the ferry-slip; of the crowd she moved among, streaming down the ferry gangway, a succession of faces glimmering past, each stamped with its headlong personal object. They were still spurred and ridden by it, while she . . . The salt breath of the sea rushed up to meet her, with suggestion of the immensities of oceans.

She found an outside seat forward.

It was an evening clear, moonless, with a marvelous purple over water and sky. Every light of the ships in harbor was reflected, a trailing glory, in the glassy bay; and the ferry was plowing through them, with its dull, monotonous pulse like the beat of a heart. The white bulk of a steamer moved directly before its course, white lights, green, red lights — the *Nippon Maru* outward bound. Florence's eyes followed it. And there stirred faintly in her the passion she had always cherished for the mysterious other side of the world — Japan, and that great continent beyond it. And as the immensity unrolled before her — the thousands of miles, the millions of people with passions identical, with ideals unintelligible to hers, but in the great sum of existence as necessary — the vast, varied face of the world diminished, dwarfed her own identity.

She had one of those fortunate moments when, the body being very weary, the spirit takes its opportunity and mounts beyond the body's demands. If she had put it to herself, she would have said she had "got outside of things." It floated before her, more like an impression than a thought, that to have had one's happiness was what counted, though it passed like the glimpse of purple sea. And the eye of the soul that could catch it, could treasure it up to carry into some dim, empty, echoing time-to-come. The time of activity, of struggle for what was most desirable, most beautiful, or most necessary to life — the delights, the sufferings, the defeating, the half successes — this time inevitably was ended. Sometimes the change life made was death, sometimes only another face of life, as now it came to her — a time of waiting, of watching, of trying to perceive and understand, from the passionate, personal motives acting themselves out around her, the great intention of the whole.

Before her the lights of the city were all alive, trailing around the water-front, marching over the hills, ringing them with fire, and trembling away into the large stars of the low, soft sky. Her hand was on the rail, and she dropped her chin upon it, looking longingly, searchingly into the heart of the glittering tangle, as if it were the veritable tangle of life.

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